

## **ARTICLES by RAMACHANDRA GUHA**

**(Retrieved from his archives)**

### **Appreciating Nehru**

The most admired human being on the planet may be a one-time boxer named Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. To spend three decades in prison fighting racial oppression, and then guide and oversee the peaceful transition to a multi-racial democracy, surely ranks as the greatest personal achievement since the end of the Second World War.

For the capaciousness of his vision and the generosity of his spirit, Nelson Mandela has sometimes been compared to Mahatma Gandhi. Like Gandhi, Mandela is both a reconciling figure and a universal figure, admired across the social spectrum in his own land and in other lands too. There are also odd personal details that bind them: Mandela was a friend of Gandhi's second son Manilal, Mandela and Gandhi were both lawyers, Mandela and Gandhi both lived in Johannesburg, Mandela and Gandhi were both incarcerated in that city's Fort Prison. This prison now houses South Africa's Constitutional Court, on whose premises one can find permanent exhibits devoted to the life and example of Mandela and of Gandhi.

Mandela's comrade Ahmad Kathrada, his fellow prisoner in Robben Island, once asked why he admired Gandhi. Mandela answered: 'But Nehru was my hero'. To his biographer Anthony Sampson, Mandela explained his preference as follows: 'When a Maharaja tried to stop him he [Nehru] would push him aside. He was that type of man, and we liked him because his conduct indicated how we should treat our own oppressors. Whereas Gandhi had a spirit of steel, but nevertheless it was shown in a very gentle and smooth way, and he would rather suffer in humility than retaliate.'

In the 1940s, Mandela closely read Jawaharlal Nehru's books, including his autobiography. His speeches often quoted from Nehru's writings. A phrase that particularly resonated was 'there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere', used by Mandela in his first major political speech, made in September 1953. Decades later, the phrase found its way into Mandela's autobiography, whose Nehruvian title is 'Long Walk to Freedom'.

In 1980, Nelson Mandela was given the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. Since Mandela was in prison, his comrade Oliver Tambo—who had left South Africa to canvass support overseas, while travelling on an Indian passport—came to New Delhi to accept the award on his behalf. 'Nelson Mandela's captors may wish to ponder the fact', remarked Tambo in his speech, 'that Jawaharlal Nehru, who was no stranger to imprisonment and was in no way destroyed by it, served the world community, including the British, far better

as a free man than as a political prisoner. Nelson Mandela's 18 years' imprisonment has in no way destroyed him, and will not.'

Jawaharlal Nehru appealed to Mandela and Tambo on account of his political views. As a socialist and modernist, Nehru's ideas were, to these South African radicals, more congenial than Gandhi's. But there was also a practical reason for their appreciation; the fact that, as Prime Minister of India, Nehru worked tirelessly to arraign the apartheid regime in the court of world opinion. Thus, as Tambo noted in his speech in New Delhi in 1980, 'if Mahatma Gandhi started and fought his heroic struggle in South Africa and India, Jawaharlal Nehru was to continue it in Asia, Africa and internationally. In 1946, India broke trade relations with South Africa—the first country to do so. Speaking at the Bandung Conference in April 1955, Jawaharlal Nehru declared: "There is nothing more terrible than the infinite tragedy of Africa in the past few hundred years."'

Shortly after the Bandung Conference, Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Soviet Union. When he spoke at Moscow University, in the audience was a young law student named Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev. Decades later, Gorbachev recalled the impact Nehru's speech made on him. 'Obviously, we [students] were still very far from understanding the principles of democracy', he wrote in his memoirs: 'Yet, the simplified black-and-white picture of the world as presented by our propaganda was even then considered rather sceptically by the students. Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Moscow in June 1955 was an unexpected stimulus for me in this respect. ... This amazing man, his noble bearing, keen eyes and warm and disarming smile, made a deep impression on me'.

Thirty years after hearing Nehru speak in Moscow, Gorbachev helped bring about a peaceful end to the Cold War while permitting a transition to democracy in Eastern Europe. Unlike Soviet rulers in 1956, 1968 and 1979, he did not send troops into Soviet satellites whose people wanted an end to Stalinist one-party regimes. It appears the early exposure to Jawaharlal Nehru played at least some part in the reformist and reconciling politics of the mature Gorbachev.

I quote these appreciations for three reasons: because they are little-known, because Mandela and Gorbachev are both considerable figures, and because their admiration runs counter to the widespread disapprobation of Nehru among large sections of India's youth, middle-class, and intelligentsia.

Greatly admired within India during his lifetime, Nehru witnessed a precipitous fall in his reputation after his death. This accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, when his ideas on the economy, on foreign affairs, and on social harmony all came under sharp attack. There was a vigorous campaign to free entrepreneurs from all forms of state control and regulation; a major, countrywide movement to redefine Indian secularism by making it more 'Hindu' in theory and practice; and a clamour from the media and business elite to abandon India's non-alignment in favour of an ever closer relationship with the United States.

India has experimented now with twenty years of anti-Nehruvian policies in economics, social affairs, and foreign policy. These radical shifts have shown mixed results. Creative capitalism is being increasingly subordinated to crony capitalism; aggressive Hindutva has led to horrific riots and the loss of many lives; and the United States has not shown itself to be as willing to accommodate India's interests as our votaries of a special relationship had hoped.

Among reflective Indians, there is a sense that these decades of Nehru-bashing have been somewhat counterproductive. It is true that Nehru was excessively suspicious of entrepreneurs, yet some form of state regulation is still required in a complex and unequal society. His ideas of religious and linguistic pluralism remain entirely relevant, or else India would become a Hindu Pakistan. And it suits India's interests to have good relations with all major powers—China, the European Union, Russia, and the United States—rather than hitch its wagon to the US alone.

Nehru's respect for democratic procedure, his inclusive social vision, and his independent foreign policy all remain relevant. Other aspects of his legacy are more problematic: these include his neglect of primary education, his lack of interest in military matters, and his scepticism of political decentralization. However, a balanced appreciation of Nehru's legacy—its positive and its negative aspects—is inhibited by the fact that the ruling Congress Party is controlled so closely by individuals related to him and who claim to speak in his name.

In a recent interview to *The Hindu*, Nayantara Sahgal pointed out that it was Indira Gandhi who created the 'Nehru-Gandhi' dynasty, not her father. This is absolutely true. In a book published in 1960, the editor Frank Moraes (by this time a sharp critic of the Prime Minister) wrote that 'there is no question of Nehru's attempting to create a dynasty of his own; it would be inconsistent with his character and career'. When Nehru died in 1964, another bitter critic, D. F. Karaka, nonetheless praised his resolve 'not to indicate any preference with regard to his successor. This, [Nehru] maintained, was the privilege of those who were left behind. He himself was not concerned with that issue'.

Living outside India, insulated in their daily lives from the consequences of the deeds or misdeeds of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi, both Nelson Mandela and Mikhail Gorbachev could appreciate the sagacity and moral depth of Nehru's political vision. We who live in India are however inhibited from doing so by the unfortunate accident whereby control of our most powerful political party has passed on to Nehru's descendants.

[Ramachandra Guha's new book, *Patriots and Partisans*, has just been published by Penguin/Allen Lane.]

## **Jinnah Reassessed**

(17 Dec 2011)

It was on a pavement near Bombay's Flora Fountain, some fifteen years ago, that I discovered Hamid Dalwai. On the hard dark stone the title of his book leapt out for attention: *Muslim Politics in India*. I bought it (for something like twenty rupees), and took it home to Bangalore. I have since read it at least half-a-dozen times.

Although little known today, Hamid Dalwai was perhaps the most courageous thinker to come from the ranks of Indian Muslims. Born in the Konkan, he moved to Bombay as a young man and threw himself into left-wing politics. He wrote some fine short stories, and also some superb political essays, these translated by his friend and fellow writer Dilip Chitre and published in book form as *Muslim Politics in India*. The book excoriates both Muslim reactionaries and Hindu obscurantists, and calls for liberals of all shades and faiths to come together on a common platform to build a secular, plural, and modern India.

When I included Hamid Dalwai's work in an anthology of Indian political thought, some critics were puzzled. Others were enraged. The source of the puzzlement (and anger) was two-fold—first, that I had included a man the critics had never heard of; second, that I had excluded Maulana Azad. It is true that Dalwai is now largely forgotten. This is in part because he died in his early forties. As for choosing him over Azad, the fact is that while the Maulana was a great scholar and nationalist, his writings do not really speak to the problems of the present.

My admiration of Dalwai was confirmed by a later essay of his that I recently read. This is a reassessment of the life and legacy of Mohamed Ali Jinnah, translated by Dilip Chitre, and published in 1973 in the literary journal *Quest*. That journal is now defunct, but Dalwai's essay is included in an excellent recent anthology called *The Best of Quest*.

Dalwai begins by noting that 'the emergence of Bangladesh was the final blow to Mohamed Ali Jinnah's grand political dream'. He then debunks the notion that Jinnah was a secular and modern-minded liberal who was forced by the intransigence of Hindus in general and Gandhi and Nehru in particular to advocate a separate Muslim state of Pakistan. Dalwai thus re-examines two key events: the Lucknow Pact of 1916 and the Cabinet Mission plan of 1946. He points out that if Jinnah's intention, as his apologists claim, was to make common cause with the Hindus against the colonial rulers, then after the Lucknow Pact he should have been 'right in the centre of the battlefield fighting the British. On the contrary, it appears that during this intervening period, Jinnah was making an assessment of what the British were likely to concede and what share of these concessions the Muslims should demand.'

Turning to the Cabinet Mission Plan, Dalwai argues that Jinnah accepted this because it 'not only enabled the Muslims to enjoy political power in the Muslim-majority provinces but also to get a fifty per cent representation at the Centre, thus allowing them to rule over the Hindu majority'.

Jinnah further 'welcomed the plan because it left the Princely States as they were, and he thought he could use "Muslim India" and "Princely India" as counterweights against "Hindu India"'. Jinnah upheld the rights of sundry Nawabs and Maharajas, while, as Dalwai notes, 'persistently oppos[ing] the demands of the subjects of the Princely States for more rights for themselves.'

Revisionist or nostalgic historians blame Gandhi and Nehru for not agreeing to the Cabinet Mission plan; had they done so, there might still have been a united India. Dalwai agrees that 'in a sense it is true that if Gandhi and Nehru had satisfied Jinnah's demands, partition would have been avoided'. However, as he tellingly adds, 'it was not the prime objective of Gandhi and Nehru to avoid partition at any cost. If any cost were paid for avoiding partition, every Indian would have been converted to either Islam or Hinduism to achieve such a goal'.

Dalwai turns next to the historical legacies, c. 1973, of those great contemporaries and rivals, Gandhi and Jinnah. He prefaces his comparison by noting that progressive intellectuals have tended to see Gandhi as a revivalist and Jinnah as a modernist. And yet, as Dalwai points out, 'in Gandhi's "revivalist" India the minorities can at least survive, and the country has a secular Constitution. It has launched a great experiment to build a modern nation. In spite of sixteen languages—all equal—and nearly eight hundred dialects, this multi-racial and multi-religious nation is still integrated. The women of this nation have the franchise without having to struggle for it.'

On the other hand, continues Dalwai, Jinnah created 'a Pakistan which has moved in an anti-secular and anti-democratic direction. Within barely two months of its creation, fifty per cent of the Hindus in that country were forced to leave it. The narrow and rigid traditions of Islam were increasingly strengthened; the state itself became Islamic with no trace of democracy and can still not find its national identity'. If Jinnah was indeed 'a modern secular democrat', asks Dalwai, 'why did his Pakistan become a country which could not have adult franchise and whose politics had all along been founded solely on blind hatred of the Hindus?'

Dalwai ends his devastating portrait of Jinnah's career with a brief analysis of his personal frailties in the face of the violence at Partition. Gandhi, as we know, spent his last years working heroically to stem the violence, succeeding in Calcutta, before being martyred in Delhi. On the other hand, during the winter of 1947-8, when communal riots raged across India and Pakistan, Jinnah 'refused to sign a joint appeal with Gandhi which would have helped to create a climate conducive to the protection of the minorities.' In fact, during the riots,

'not once did [Jinnah] step out of the Governor-General's residence. On the contrary, as soon as he learnt about Gandhi's assassination, he was so much worried about the possibility of a similar fate overtaking him that he ordered a strong wall to be built in the backyard of his mansion'. These facts, writes Dalwai, 'suggest that he was either a moral coward or a political hypocrite, if not both. In either case, it is clear that Jinnah's concern for human values was rather weak'.

Perhaps this verdict is excessively harsh. In the winter of 1947-8, Jinnah was an old, sick, dying man. Likewise, since 1973 the Republic of India has witnessed a period of Emergency rule and the rise of Hindutva. That said, for all their anxieties and difficulties, Muslims in India are still better off—culturally and economically—than Hindus in Pakistan. The contrast is even sharper when it comes to linguistic pluralism—Pakistan was divided because of the suppression of Bengali and Bengalis, whereas in India multiple languages and linguistic communities have been allowed by the state to flourish. Compared to the West, women in India are grossly victimized; on the other hand, compared to Pakistan they are moderately (and perhaps even substantially) empowered. Finally, in contrast to Pakistan, the military has virtually no role in Indian politics.

With regard to whether free India would be united or divided, Gandhi lost the argument. History however, has vindicated him. For, as Hamid Dalwai pointed out all those years ago, the legacy of the allegedly ‘revivalist’ Gandhi has proved somewhat more humane than that of the professedly ‘modernist’ Jinnah. The contrast becomes even sharper when we move beyond the sub-continent to consider the world as a whole. In North America, in Eastern Europe and Western Europe, in South Africa, Tibet and Burma, and as we speak in the Middle East and North Africa—in all these lands where the name of Jinnah is unknown, the example of Gandhi still animates—sixty years after his death—struggles for democracy, social justice, religious pluralism, and the like.

## **HISTORY’S LESSONS**

Some commentators have compared the struggle led by Anna Hazare with the movement against corruption led by Jayaprakash Narayan in the 1970s. A man of integrity and courage, a social worker who has eschewed the loaves and fishes of office, a septugenerian who has emerged out of semi-retirement to take on an unfeeling government—thus JP then, and thus Anna now.

Superficially, the comparison of Anna Hazare to JP is flattering—to Hazare at any rate. But let us look more closely at how Jayaprakash Narayan’s movement unfolded. JP’s papers are housed in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. These papers are worth revisiting in light of the struggle of which Anna Hazare has become the symbol and the mascot.

Once a hero of the Quit India Movement, then a founder of the Socialist Party, Jayaprakash Narayan abandoned politics for social work in the 1950s. Two decades later, he returned to politics at the invitation of students disenchanted with corruption in Bihar. At first, JP focused attention on his own state; then, much as Hazare has now done, his struggle moved outwards to embrace the whole of India.

In the late summer of 1974, as his movement was gathering ground, JP went to Vellore for a surgical operation. While he was recovering, his associate Acharya Ramamurti kept him up-to-date with the struggle. Ramamurti’s communications, note, with some alarm, the entry of a

political party into a professedly ‘apolitical’ movement. While JP was away, wrote his colleague, ‘the leadership of the movement at least at local levels, is passing into the hands of the Jana Sangh’. Ramamurti also worried that ‘the common man has yet to be educated into the ways and values of our movement, whose appeal to him continues to be more negative than constructive’.

After some weeks in hospital JP returned to Bihar. In September 1974, he invited his friend R. K. Patil to come observe the situation at first-hand. Patil was in his own way a considerable figure, who had quit the Indian Civil Service to join the freedom struggle, and later worked in rural development in Maharashtra. He now travelled through Bihar, speaking to a cross-section of JP’s supporters and critics, and to many bystanders as well.

On his return to Nagpur, Patil wrote JP a long letter with his impressions. He appreciated ‘the tremendous popular enthusiasm generated by the movement’. However, he deplored its disparaging of political parties in particular and constitutional democracy in general. As a man of intelligence and principle, Patil was ‘well aware of the patent drawbacks of the Government presided over by Indira Gandhi’. But he did not think it ‘wise to substitute for the law of “Government by Discussion”, the law of “Government by Public Street Opinion”’. Patil reminded JP that ‘there is no other way of ascertaining the general opinion of the people in a Nation-State, except through free and fair elections’.

The materials of history thus suggest that the parallels between JP and Anna Hazare are less comforting than we might suppose. Front organizations of the Jana Sangh’s successor, the Bharatiya Janata Party, are now playing an increasingly active role in ‘India against Corruption’. While Anna Hazare cannot be blamed for the infiltration of his movement by partisan interests, he certainly stands guilty, as did JP, of suggesting that the street—or the maidan—should have a greater say in political decision-making than a freely elected Parliament.

Such are the parallels in the realm of civil society; what then, of the other side? The main difference here is that while the Prime Minister of JP’s day, Indira Gandhi, was excessively arrogant, the present Prime Minister is excessively timid. Despite his personal honesty, Dr Manmohan Singh is complicit in the colossal corruption promoted by the Ministers in his Government. Further, he is guilty of a lack of faith in the procedures of constitutional democracy. His decision not to stand for a Lok Sabha seat does not violate the Constitution in law, but does so in spirit. Because of his unwillingness to face the electorate, his claim to defend the primacy of Parliament lacks conviction.

An arrogant politician can be chastened by defeat—as happened with Indira Gandhi in 1977. But it is hard to believe, based on his recent record, that Dr Singh can act boldly now to recover the reputation of his Government. By not sacking Suresh Kalmadi after the media revelations of his misdeeds, by not sacking A. Raja as soon as the information on the spectrum scandal was sent to his office, by sanctioning an election alliance in Tamil Nadu with the heavily tainted DMK, by

refusing to rein in loose-tongued Congress Ministers—in these and other ways, the Prime Minister has contributed to a widespread public revulsion against his regime.

It is time that Dr Singh made way for a younger man or woman, for someone who has greater political courage, and who is a member of the Lok Sabha rather than the Rajya Sabha. As things stand, with every passing day in office his reputation declines further. So, more worryingly, does the credibility of constitutional democracy itself.

To restore faith in the constitutional process some heads must roll in Government. But serious introspection must take place within what passes for ‘civil society’ as well. The movement led by Anna Hazare has focused sharp attention on the corruption of our political class. However, the task now is not to further polarize state and society, but to find democratic and transparent ways of making politicians more efficient and less venal.

The scholar and public servant Gopalkrishna Gandhi recently observed that the arteries of constitutional democracy have become clogged, contaminated by years of abuse and disuse. One needs, he said, a bypass surgery to restore the heart to its proper functioning. The image is striking, and apposite. The current movement against corruption may come to constitute such a bypass, so long as it does not claim to be the heart itself.

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### **THREE COMPARISONS,**

As the election results started coming in on Friday the 13th, and the spectacular rout of the Left Front in West Bengal became clear, my mind went back to the spring of 1977. I was a student of St. Stephen’s College in Delhi, too young to vote, but old enough to recognize the significance of the election then being conducted. This followed the lifting of a State of Emergency, during which Opposition politicians had been put in prison and the democratic rights of citizens withdrawn.

While in jail, the leaders and cadres of parties opposed to the Congress of Indira Gandhi had suppressed their differences—personal and ideological—and formed a united Janata Party. The leader asked to campaign in Delhi University was Atal Behari Vajpayee, in part because the university had long been a stronghold of the Jana Sangh’s youth wing.

I went to hear Vajpayee speak at the Maurice Nagar Chowk. He spoke brilliantly, although at this distance in time I cannot recall exactly what he said. We were charmed and moved by his oratory, but still thought it was in a losing cause. The Congress Party had never lost a General Election—why would it do so now?



Insulated in our hostels, playing cricket and playing the guitar, the students of St. Stephen's College had not been exposed to the horrors of the Emergency. But tens of millions of other Indians had. These now came out to vote for anyone but Indira. The Congress lost all seats in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, and most seats in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan as well.

The Congress's defeat in the General Elections of 1977 was unexpected; the defeat of the Left Front in West Bengal this May expected. Still, there are some notable parallels. For one thing, a party in power for three decades had finally been unseated. For another, the wave had swept away all the stalwarts on the losing (previously ruling) side. Even Mamata Banerjee did not think that Buddhadev Bhattacharya would lose his own seat. (This was as surprising as the defeat of Indira Gandhi in her own pocket borough of Rae Bareilly in 1977.) Finally, both elections witnessed the release of a suppressed anger, a mass anger, of citizens subject to the actions of an increasingly arbitrary and brutal state. Turkman Gate (where houses of poor Muslims were demolished) and Moradabad (where poor Muslims and Hindus were dragged away to be vasectomized) were to Indira's Congress what Nandigram and Singur became to Buddhadev's Left Front.

So, hearing of the West Bengal results, I was reminded of the Lok Sabha elections of 1977. But as the day wore on, another and possibly more relevant parallel came to mind. This was with the Assembly elections in Andhra Pradesh in 1983. When the Congress lost the General Elections in 1977, it still won 41 out of 42 seats in Andhra. In this state it seemed unconquerable—until one maverick came along to challenge it.

This man was the film actor Nandamuri Taraka Rama Rao. 'NTR' (as he was popularly known) had previously shown little interest in politics. His own films dealt with mythological rather than social themes. But when Rajiv Gandhi, then Congress General Secretary, scolded the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh at Hyderabad airport, NTR was outraged. By insulting the elected head of the State, this political novice from New Delhi, who owed his position solely to his lineage, had insulted the Telugu people themselves.

Rama Rao now put his acting career on hold, and ventured into politics. He began a Telugu Desam Party, which participated in the next Assembly elections. Political commentators wrote off the TDP at birth. It had no structure, no organization, no ideology. It was led by a man whose appearance and personality combined the mystic and the comic. The Congress, on the other hand, had deep roots in the Andhra country. T. Prakasam, Pattabhi Sitaramayya, N. G. Ranga, Neelam Sanjiva Reddy, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan—there was a long list of Telugu-speaking patriots of national renown, all associated with the Congress Party.

Not for the first or last time, the pundits of the press called it wrong. The Congress in Andhra was vanquished by a man dressed in saffron who travelled in a van dressed up as a chariot. The imagery was religious, but the message was resolutely political. NTR stood for the self-respect of the Andhras. They were not vassals of rulers from the North but a proud and ancient people, with

a record of achievement in literature, music, architecture, the arts, and—not least—state-making. Such was the past; in the present, however, Congressmen in Hyderabad had become chamchas of their bosses in New Delhi. It had thus fallen to NTR to restore pride in the collective and combined history of the Telugu speaking people.

Mamata Banerjee is a woman, not a man. She is a lifelong political activist, not a film star who turned reluctantly to politics. Still, there remains one striking parallel between Andhra Pradesh in 1983 and West Bengal in 2011. In both cases, an individual took on a vast, complex, well-funded and socially embedded political organization. In both cases, the will of the person proved superior to the power of the party.

This second parallel is perhaps more plausible than the first. This compares like to like—one state election to another, rather than a state election to a national election. In 2011, the Left Front had been in power for thirty-four years in West Bengal. When NTR decided on a change of career, the Congress had been undefeated in Andhra Pradesh since Independence. The opposition to one-party rule took shape in the form, above all, of a person. Charles De Gaulle mistakenly believed France to be an extension of himself. But the Trinamool would be nothing without Mamata. The TDP was created from scratch by NTR. The organization was secondary to the leader, indeed the organization was subsumed by the leader, whose individual charisma and courage triumphed over the party that controlled their state.

In the early afternoon of the 13th, the television channels offered a comparison of their own. Mamata Banerjee, they said, was the Indian Lech Walesa. The dockyard leader also came from a modest social background, and represented the interests of the proletariat more reliably than the Communists who were in power in Poland. In both respects he was akin to the Didi of Kalighat.

Mamata Banerjee's own supporters may see her win as *sui generis*—as having no precursors of any kind. To be sure, her personality is, so to say, her own, while the victory of the TMC-led alliance is a product of the distinctive history of West Bengal. Still, each of the three comparisons offered here is suggestive—up to a point. Each allows us to see the West Bengal elections in a fresh light. Like that of the Janata Party, the victory of Mamata and the TMC is a product of widespread popular anger against authoritarian rule; like that of NTR, it is an affirmation of an individual's will against the power of an organization; like that of Lech Walesa and Solidarity, it shames the betrayal of the people by Communists who claimed to be speaking in the name of the people.

One last point—which must be made, even at the risk of seeming to spoil the party. Janata in 1977, NTR in 1983, and Solidarity and Walesa after 1989—all won elections they would not, a year or two previously, have expected to win. (In the first and third instances, these were elections which, a year or two previously, they would not have thought would be held.) In all cases, the popular enthusiasm that sustained and nourished them in opposition dissipated soon after they came to office. The Janata Party, for India; NTR and the TDP, for Andhra; and Lech

Walesa and his party, for Poland—all provided administrations lacking in focus and intent. If Mamata Banerjee and her TMC emulate them in this respect, they could, quite quickly, find themselves in Opposition once more.

### **NEHRUVIAN INDIANS,**

Some years ago, I coined the term ‘Nehruvian Indian’ to describe those who, in their professional and personal lives, ‘transcended the divisions of race and religion, caste and class, gender and geography.’ Viewed cynically, the term was a cloak and cover for my own confusions. Born in Dehradun of Tamil parents, with a Bengali name and now domiciled in Bangalore, it may have appeared that I was promoting a grand-sounding inclusiveness merely to mask my own lack of roots.

Two recent memoirs by Indians of far greater distinction than myself suggest that the term may still have its uses. George Verghese and Jagat Mehta both reached the pinnacle of their respective professions; the former as the editor of two major newspapers, the latter as Foreign Secretary of the Government of India. Their writing, like their life, is marked by a conspicuous lack of parochialism; they identify with all of India, as befitting two men who came of age, intellectually speaking, when Jawaharlal Nehru was Prime Minister of this country.

Mehta’s book is entitled *The Tryst Betrayed: Reflections on Diplomacy and Development*. Verghese’s is called *First Draft: Witness to the Making of Modern India*. These books provide detached, informative analyses of the inner workings of two major institutions—the diplomatic corps and the Fourth Estate respectively. But it is not aspiring journalists or diplomats alone who would benefit from a close reading of these books.

Now in their eighties, Jagat Mehta and George Verghese retain the idealism and patriotism of their youth. A love of their country suffuses their work. They both admired Nehru, yet, as men of independence of mind, never let this come in the way of a critical understanding of his style of leadership. ‘While accompanying Nehru on an election tour’, writes Mehta, ‘I realized India’s good fortune in having a man of humanity, education and dedication at the helm, but also that hero-worshipping is not always democratic; it still requires to be supplemented by the courage of dissent, which was shown by the people of Kerala’ (when they elected a Communist Government in 1957).

For his part, Verghese notes that Nehru ‘bestrode the scene like a colossus. Others were all too prone to defer to him. Jagat Mehta, who worked with him in the formative years of the new Foreign Office... called it the Panditji-knows-best syndrome. ... Indeed, after Sardar Patel’s passing, Nehru was increasingly unchallenged, though his admitted services, vision and liberal qualities undoubtedly endeared him to his countrymen.’

Verghese continues: 'By 1958-9, Nehru was in decline. He was tired and though still a charismatic figure, greatly beloved of the people, was increasingly unable to impart anything of the old dynamism to governance. ... Sycophancy had, however, become the order of the day, and there was a chorus that the nation needed Nehru and he must remain at his post. I thought differently and wrote in The Times [of India] urging him to follow his instinct and retire, perhaps to become President of India, if he so desired. The reins of governance could then pass to younger and more dynamic hands within his own lifetime, so as to ensure a smooth political transition. This was very much a minority view ...'

Both men write with insight about that most important and sometimes most exasperating set of Indians, the bureaucrats. Mehta observes that 'officers fall into three categories: the first consists of those with ultimate concern for national interest and who say so whether asked or not; the second category is of those who worry about their careers or, at best, follow orders or answer questions. The third, a largish group, falls in between: they give of their best if leadership or directions so demand but in the absence of a positive atmosphere, coast along and pass the buck without taking risks.'

The slow, super-cautious, obstructionist attitude of the typical Indian bureaucrat leads Verghese to term them the 'Abominable No-Men'. In a telling criticism of the civil service, he writes that 'the ICS/IAS was something of a closed shop, zealous of its turf and wary of interlopers, be they technocrats or lateral-entry recruits to the "system".'

Both Verghese and Mehta are critical of India's overbearing attitude to its smaller neighbours. The editor writes that 'Nehru was imperious in his attitude towards Nepal.' The diplomat argues that 'Nehru did not fully recognize, and the Ministry failed to advise him, that in the twentieth century nothing was as difficult as diplomacy between unequal neighbours.' Mehta goes so far as to say that 'there is no greater example of the squandering of permanent and beneficial interdependence in all history as between India and Nepal. ... India's relations with its [smaller] neighbours is its greatest failure in foreign policy.'

Both Verghese and Mehta spent many years in the field of rural development.

Verghese worked with Gandhian institutions interested in village renewal and political decentralization. After retirement from the Foreign Service, Mehta worked with a pioneering NGO in Rajasthan, Seva Mandir. Products (like Nehru himself) of the University of Cambridge, obliged (by their profession) to spend much of their time in national capitals, they yet made it their business to roam as widely as they could. Unlike other editors and ambassadors, Verghese and Mehta have been as comfortable, and as keen to engage with, peasants as with Prime Ministers.

Verghese's lack of insularity is also manifest in his long-standing interest in states such as Assam and Nagaland, this sparked by 'the Government of India's poor understanding of the needs and aspirations of the North-east'. He has also long advocated a just resolution of the

Kashmir dispute. As far back as the 1960s, he chastised the hawks in New Delhi for not realising that ‘the Kashmir factor every day exacts a heavy price and that India’s own self-interest demands an honourable settlement.’

Being a ‘Nehruvian Indian’ does not mean that one cannot, when reason and evidence demands, be critical, even sharply critical, of the policies of India’s first Prime Minister. But it certainly means that one recognizes the clear differences between the generally democratic Nehru and the instinctively authoritarian Indira Gandhi. When, unlike many of his fellow officers, Mehta refused to mortgage his mind to the personality of Mrs Gandhi, it was said in North and South Blocks that ‘Jagat’s independence is dangerous.’

As for Verghese, in 1969 he wrote with prescience of ‘the permanent interference of the [Congress] High Command in the States.’ On the 25th of June, 1975, with Indira Gandhi’s election petition being heard in the Supreme Court, he urged the Prime Minister to resign ‘with grace and dignity’. Instead, she imposed the Emergency, one of whose victims was Verghese himself, who lost his job for not being a pliant editor. He wryly notes that in those days Nehru’s daughter ‘saw herself as a latter-day Joan of Arc sent to save India by doing whatever her inner voices dictated.’

In the early pages of his book, Verghese recalls what the headmaster of his old school told his students: ‘Do you hope your education will enable you to get more from your country or give more to it? Will the monument you leave behind (for you cannot take it with you) be a palace on Malabar Hill or will it be one built in the hearts of the people you have served?’

Having been to the same school, I can testify that most of its products have sought to exploit India rather than give back to it. Many have built palaces—in Rajasthan, South Delhi, London, California, and not least, Malabar Hill. By contrast, George Verghese and Jagat Mehta have led lives that combined dignity with distinction, service with sacrifice. Of the Nehruvian Indians alive they are among the most honourable. It is a privilege to have known them, and now, to have read their books.

## RECONCILING GANDHI WITH AMBEDKAR,

Books do not change lives, but books can change the way we look at the world. As a student of economics, I was a high modernist who believed in transforming rural communities through industrialization. Concern for the poor came with a heavy dose of condescension. Those who lived outside cities had to be improved and uplifted through an infusion of modern technology and what would used to be known as the 'scientific temper'. Then I read Verrier Elwin's *Leaves from the Jungle*, a charming evocation of the life of the Gond tribals of central India. This, and his other works, showed me that despite their apparent illiteracy and lack of material wealth, the tribals had a rich tradition of poetry, folklore and art, a deep identification with nature, and a strong sense of community solidarity. In the latter respects they had, in fact, something to teach a modern world that dismissed them as primitive and uncivilized.

A little later, I became a Marxist, persuaded into the faith by the scholars who taught me in Kolkata. I was young and impatient; the incremental idealism of my parents' hero, Jawaharlal Nehru, did not seem sufficient to make a dent in the poverty and inequality that was so manifest a feature of social life in India. Then, on a visit to Dehradun, I picked up, on the pavement of the town's main street, a copy of George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. I took the book home and read it through the night. Orwell had seen, at first-hand, how the democratic aspirations of the Spanish people had been undermined by the takeover of their movement by a band of cynical and amoral Communists, acting under the instructions of Josef Stalin. He communicated his experiences in prose of an uncommon clarity. By the morning, I had abandoned Marxism, and was a social democrat once more.

Another book that changed the way I looked at the world was *Truth Called Them Differently*, published by the Navajivan Press in Ahmedabad. This reproduced the debates between Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. They argued about many things—India's place in the world, the role of the English language, whether an hour a day at the spinning wheel was mandatory for the patriot. The exchanges reveal the intellectual and moral qualities of the two men, each of whom had the ability (and courage) to change his views when circumstance or reason so demanded.

Elwin was once a well-known writer in India. Tagore, Gandhi and Orwell enjoy global reputations. All had a considerable and varied oeuvre in English. Their books were published by the most prestigious publishing houses. A fourth book whose reading radically altered my understanding of the world was by contrast written by an author unknown outside his native Karnataka. And it was published by a totally obscure press. Browsing through Bangalore's Premier Bookshop in the early 1990s, I came across a slim book called *The Flaming Feet*. The title was intriguing, as were its contents—a series of essays on and around the figure of B. R. Ambedkar.

Published by a local NGO called the Institute of Cultural Research and Action, *The Flaming Feet* was the first work in English of D. R. Nagaraj, a Professor of Kannada in Bangalore University. The politics of the 1930s and 1940s had placed Gandhi and Ambedkar as antagonists—as, more recently, had the politics of the 1980s and 1990s. The Bahujan Samaj Party had launched a series of stinging attacks on the Mahatma, accusing him of patronizing the Dalits and impeding rather than aiding their emancipation. From the other side, the Hindutva ideologue Arun Shourie had written a 600 page screed depicting Ambedkar as a toady of the British.

D. R. Nagaraj was unusual, and at that time at least, unique, in admiring both Gandhi and Ambedkar. To be sure, in their life-time their respective social locations made it hard for these men not to be political adversaries. By the time Ambedkar returned from his studies in the United States, Gandhi was the acknowledged leader of the national movement. For a brilliant and ambitious young man from a Dalit background, to join the Congress was to relegate oneself to a secondary role in politics. Thus, as Nagaraj pointed out, ‘there was very little scope for a Congress Harijan leader to develop interesting and useful models of praxis from within.’ So Ambedkar chose to form his own political party and fight for his people under a banner separate from, and opposed to, Gandhi’s Indian National Congress.

In *The Flaming Feet*, Nagaraj demonstrated how through their debates and arguments, Gandhi and Ambedkar transformed one another. The Mahatma became more sensitive to the structural roots of caste discrimination, while Ambedkar came to recognize that moral renewal was as critical to Dalit emancipation as economic opportunity. In seeking to honour both men, Nagaraj was, as he put it, fighting both ‘deep-rooted prejudices’ (which urged Indians to follow only one or the other) as well as ‘wishful thinking’ (which made one believe that one or other thinker provided all the answers to the Dalit predicament). Nagaraj insisted that ‘from the viewpoint of the present, there is a compelling necessity to achieve a synthesis of the two.’ ‘The greatest paradox of modern Indian history’, wrote Nagaraj, was that ‘both Gandhian and Ambedkarite perceptions of the issue are partially true, and the contending visions are yet to comprehend each other fully.’

Reading Nagaraj, like reading Tagore, Gandhi, Orwell and Elwin, was an epiphanic experience. He taught me to recognize that while Gandhi and Ambedkar were rivals in their life-time, from the point of view of India today the two men should rather be viewed as partners and collaborators. The legacy of both was required to complete the unfinished task of Dalit emancipation. After the publication of *The Flaming Feet*, Nagaraj began writing more often in English. These later essays, like the book, were marked by an unusual ability to bring disparate worlds into conversation: the past and the present, the elite and the subaltern, the vernacular and the cosmopolitan.

In 1998, just as he was maturing as a scholar and political analyst, Nagaraj died of a heart attack. Now, twelve years later, his published and unpublished essays on Dalit questions have been brought together in an expanded edition of *The Flaming Feet*, edited and sensitively introduced

by his former student Prithvi Datta Chandra Sobhi, and appearing this time under the imprint of a more mainstream publisher. Here Nagaraj writes with elegance and insight about a wide range of subjects—on the ‘lack of a living tradition of militant Gandhianism’; on the self-invention of a Dalit identity (as he points out, in searching for a history outside Hinduism, ‘the modern Dalit has to seek his rebirth in a state of fearful loneliness. S/he has nothing to rely upon in his/her immediate Hindu surroundings’); on the need to build a united front of ecological, dalit, and tribal movements.

Nagaraj was a social scientist as well as litterateur, whose mode of writing was sometimes empirical, at other times metaphorical. Here is a representative excerpt: ‘Babasaheb [Ambedkar] had no option but to reject the Gandhian model. He had realized that this model had successfully transformed Harijans as objects in a ritual of self-purification, with the ritual being performed by those who had larger heroic notions of their individual selves. In the theatre of history, in a play with such a script, the untouchables would never become heroes in their own right they were just mirrors for a hero to look at his own existentialist anger and despair, or maybe even glory.’

This new edition of *The Flaming Feet* may be the most important work of non-fiction published in this country in 2010. At any rate, it is indispensable for anyone with any serious interest in society and politics in modern India.

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## **REFUGEES AND THE REPUBLIC,**

At a meeting in Chennai that I recently attended, an official of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, herself a Swiss national, remarked that ‘the Indian Government has a very humane attitude towards refugees’. She was not merely showing courtesy towards her hosts. For, as another speaker at the symposium pointed out, in its sixty-year-career the Republic of India has given refuge to some twenty-five million people fleeing persecution in their own homelands.

Listening to these presentations, I made a list of major refugee movements into India after January 26th, 1950. This doubtless incomplete listing goes as follows: In the early 1950s, more than a million Hindus fled East Pakistan, seeking shelter chiefly in the state of West Bengal;

In the late 1950s, Tibetan Buddhists began crossing over into the Indian part of the Himalaya. Most settled near Dharamsala and Mussoorie, but several thousand made their home as far south as Karnataka;

In the early 1960s, following major Hindu-Muslim riots in East Pakistan, there was a fresh flow of refugees into eastern India;



From the mid 1960s, a steady trickle of Garo and Chakma tribals began coming into north-east India from East Pakistan;

In the early 1970s, Hindus and Muslims, numbering some nine million in all, came across the border, being placed in temporary shelters across West Bengal, and parts of Tripura and Assam as well;

In the early 1980s, very many Sri Lankan Tamils crossed the Palk Strait into Tamil Nadu;

From the late 1980s, many Burmese nationals began seeking asylum in India.

What is striking about these successive waves is that the migrants were all fleeing majoritarian or authoritarian policies in their own countries. The Bengali Hindus were the victims of an Islamic Pakistan; the Tibetan Buddhists of a cruel Communist regime; the Sri Lankan Tamils of Sinhala chauvinism; the Burmese of a military dictatorship. The refugees of 1971 were fleeing both the Punjabi chauvinism of the Pakistani elite and the brutality of the Pakistani army. For all these people, the Republic of India felt somehow safer than the country of which they were citizens. (In addition to these victims of persecution, India has also provided a home to large numbers of Hindus from Nepal and Muslims from Bangladesh who have come as economic migrants.)

During the Partition riots of 1946-7, millions of Muslims refugees left India for Pakistan, even as millions of Hindus and Sikhs came into it. However, after the establishment of our Republic in 1950, the movement has been strictly one way. While India has welcomed in refugees from Pakistan, China, Bangladesh, Burma, and Sri Lanka. there are no Indian refugees in those countries.

As that UN official pointed out, our tradition of hospitality to victims of discrimination brings credit to India and Indians. A poor, divided and still imperfectly united country has provided refuge and dignity to tens of millions of aliens. This has been the handiwork of both state and citizen; for, while public policies have welcomed refugees in, the aam admi has provided space and succour to them. Overall, our record in this regard compares very favourably to that of the richer and older nations of Europe and North America.

Indians should be more aware, and perhaps more proud, of this tradition than they currently are. But the self-congratulation should not be excessive. For, even as we have welcomed in some twenty-five million refugees since 1950, in the same period we—that is to say, the people and Government of India—have displaced roughly the same number of our own fellow citizens from their lands and villages.

There have been two major groups of ‘internal refugees’ in independent India; the victims of development projects, and the victims of social strife. Since 1950, perhaps as many as twenty million Indians have been ousted from their homes by new hydro-electric projects, mines, factories, roads, colleges and universities, and townships. Those displaced have come

disproportionately from the class of small peasants, whereas the schemes they have had to make way for have benefited the urban middle and upper classes, as well as farmers with large landholdings.

In the early years of independence, there was little protest at this displacement. Tribals and peasants who surrendered their lands to development schemes were persuaded that this was in the larger 'national interest'. From the 1970s, however, social activists began to mobilize against forced displacement, on the legitimate grounds that those ousted by dams and factories were paid inadequate compensation, and were not provided any stake in these projects. Large dams were often the target; as with the protests against the Koel-Karo, Tehri, and Narmada dams, which were all important precursors to the more recent struggles against forcible land acquisition in Singur, Nandigram, and Niyamgiri. There is one important difference, however; whereas the earlier protests were aimed at public sector companies, these new movements of resistance have as their twin targets the state and the private corporations that its land acquisition policies seek to benefit.

Since 1950, some five million Indians have also been rendered homeless by sectarian or civil violence. After the bloodshed of Partition, Hindu-Muslim animosity was somewhat stilled by the shock and popular revulsion at the murder of Mahatma Gandhi. However, there were episodic riots in the 1960s and 1970s, and then—as a direct consequence of the Sangh Parivar's Ayodhya movement—a more-or-less continuous stream of rioting between 1989 and 1993. The destruction of the Babri Masjid led to another lull, this broken a decade later, when Gujarat witnessed a horrific pogrom against Muslims.

For the most part, the main offenders in religious riots have been radical or extremist Hindus; the main sufferers, poor and vulnerable Muslims. There have been two major exceptions; the pogrom against the Sikhs in Delhi and some other northern cities in 1984, and the forced expulsion of Pandits from the Kashmir Valley by Islamic fundamentalists in 1989-90.

Other Indians have been displaced as a consequence of conflicts between the state and those who seek to challenge or overthrow it. The Naga and Mizo insurgencies, and the response of the Indian Army to them, led to very many innocent villagers being killed or rendered homeless. More recently, the Maoist insurrection, and the state's response to it, has also caused hundreds of thousands of Indians to abandon their homes to save their lives.

Religious violence and armed insurrection may have arisen independently of state action, but the policies—and practices—of the Government of India have often contributed to their escalation. Because the homeless are abandoned by the state but provided succour by religious groups, there is a polarization of sectarian sentiment. Because the perpetrators of riots are never punished, there are always provocateurs available to start new (and more deadly) conflagrations.

There is an old line about India that some people are never tired of repeating—that of what can be truthfully said about this country the opposite is also true. A more evocative version of this

aphorism, attributed to Jawaharlal Nehru, runs as follows: 'India is home to all that is truly noble as well as truly disgusting in the human experience.' So it is with our refugee policy; honourable and admirable when it comes to treating victims of persecution from other lands, shameful and shocking with regard to the refugees created by economic and political developments within India.

## QUESTIONS OF PROPRIETY

When, in the year 1974, Mrs Indira Gandhi and Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) became bitter political opponents, there was a peculiar poignancy to their rivalry. For JP and Jawaharlal Nehru had been close friends. So, independently, were JP's wife Prabhavati and Nehru's wife Kamala. In fact, before starting an all-India movement against the policies of the Prime Minister, JP went to see Mrs Gandhi to gift her the letters that her mother had written to his recently deceased wife.

Fortunately, JP did not return the (many fewer) letters Nehru had written to Prabhavati. One hangs on the wall of the home in the Patna locality of Kadam Kuan where Narayan and his spouse both spent their last years. When I visited that house recently, it was to pay tribute to the memory of JP and his self-effacing Gandhian wife. That I found a letter by Nehru which still speaks to us today was an unexpected bonus.

The letter was written in 1958, by which time Kamala Nehru had been dead for more than twenty years and her husband had been Prime Minister for more than ten. It was handwritten, which was a surprise, since Nehru had a battery of stenographers and typists at his command. And it was written in Hindustani, which was also worthy of comment, since by this time Nehru did not really write very much in his mother's tongue.

I was not carrying a notebook or pen, so am here summarizing the letter's contents from memory. Apparently, Prabhavati had wished to start a school for girls and name it for Kamala Nehru. She had written to Jawaharlal asking whether he would come inaugurate it. Nehru, in reply, said that he was delighted that this school was being planned, for he had long been an advocate of education for girls. But, he added, he had taken a vow that in the case of any school, project, or programme started in memory of his father (Motilal Nehru) or his wife, he would not participate in its inauguration. He asked Prabhavati to go ahead and start the school, with another chief guest if required. He added by way of consolation that when the place was up and running, he would come visit it anyway.

It is reasonable to speculate that Nehru adopted this policy as a way of discouraging flatterers and intriguers. To be sure, Prabhavati's admiration for Kamala was utterly sincere, and the cause of women's education utterly noble. But if Nehru had come and opened her school, how would he say no to others who sought to attach the name of his father or wife to schemes whose chief intention was to ingratiate the proposer to the most famous man in India?

Did Indira Gandhi, I wonder, adopt the same policy when it came to her time as Prime Minister? I somehow think not. She certainly encouraged the naming of the capital's best funded university after her father, and was quite happy to permit other sarkari schemes adopting his name as well. Rajiv Gandhi, in turn, was an enthusiastic supporter, when he was Prime Minister, of programmes funded by the state that took the name of his mother. We know, for example, that he took a keen personal interest in the naming, founding, and inauguration of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi.

In this respect, the present President of the Congress has followed the example of Indira and Rajiv rather than Nehru. Thus, she was the chief guest at the inauguration of the Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Hyderabad in March 2008—as well as the chief guest at the inauguration of the Rajiv Gandhi Sea Link in Mumbai in June 2009. Would Sonia Gandhi have acted differently had she known Jawaharlal Nehru's views in this regard? One does not know. What we can say, with some certainty, is that she is unaware of the existence of Nehru's letter to Prabhavati where his views on the matter were so clearly and firmly stated. For, while the Congress President has visited Patna several times, each time she would have stayed well clear of the home of a man she knew only as her mother-in-law's most dogged political opponent.

At last count, some four hundred government initiatives, institutions, projects, and programmes were named after either Nehru, Indira, or Rajiv. This is a consequence of a symbiotic relationship between the flatterer and the flattered. For Cabinet Ministers, State Chief Ministers, and heads of public sector undertakings all know that by attaching one or other of these names to a project, they can ensure both that it is well funded and that they, personally, can rise in the esteem of the most powerful family in India.

Jawaharlal Nehru would surely have been appalled by this use (or misuse) of public money for furthering ancestor worship. His rectitude and propriety stands in striking contrast to the behaviour of later members of his family. But it stands in contrast to the attitude of most other Indians too. For instance, one of India's best-known scientists actually attended the inauguration of a circle named after himself in Bangalore.

The later Nehru-Gandhis may think that the ubiquitous naming of programmes and places after members of their family is not much more than their due. But that distinguished men of science fall prey to such vanity is a sign of how far we have moved from the time of Jawaharlal Nehru.

## NEHRU IN A NOVEL

Arguably the best single-volume study of India's first Prime Minister is Nehru: A Contemporary's Estimate, by the Australian diplomat Walter Crocker. This is a book that I have long known (and admired). However, when I met the author's son recently, he presented me a copy of a lesser known work by his mother, a novel through the pages of which Nehru flits in and out.

Claire Crocker's Peacock Dancing is set in the India of the early 1960s. The main characters include the Australian High Commissioner, here named Sir Ronald Selborne, his wife, Caroline, and their daughter, Elizabeth. The last-named falls in love with a Rajput army officer, while her closest friend, the daughter of the Swedish Ambassador, wishes to marry an official in the Pakistani mission in New Delhi.

These romances and their respective fates are at the heart of the novel. But since much of the action takes place at diplomatic parties and government receptions, the most important man in New Delhi cannot fail to make an appearance. After meeting him at a party, Elizabeth Selborne reflects that 'No man, not even her father, could draw affection so easily. It was not only Nehru's handsome features, mobile expressions, elegance, warm smile, and easy relaxed manner. There was also an inner spirit that defied description. Even his sudden flashes of rage at some injustice or stupid inefficiency had a humanity and warmth about them and were soon over'.

A later chapter features a reception at the Prime Minister's house, in honour of the visiting violinist Yehudi Menuhin. Here, Nehru charmed Caroline and Elizabeth by telling them 'the history of some of the great women of India's past. Of the Hindu princesses who had led their armies against the Moghul invaders; of great seers and holy women; of Sanskrit poetesses. As he spoke his brown eyes were alight and, although other guests around were listening to the beautifully modulated voice, Caroline felt that he was speaking to her alone as he related a particular tale'.

The admiration was apparently shared by the head of the household. Thus, as they drove past beggars and lepers in the streets of the capital, Sir Ronald was moved to comment: 'That's what Nehru is up against. Some of his own people could do more to help, after all'.

The novel is set against the backdrop of India's humiliating defeat in the war with China in 1962. Some months after the event, Nehru walks Caroline through his garden, where he introduces her to the panda gifted him in better times by the Chinese Prime Minister, Chou En-Lai. As they admire the animal, Nehru, remarks: 'My error was to think that the word of a man of honour is sufficient'. Then he adds: 'He is a man of honour, Chou En-Lai. Of that I am still certain; however, no-one can tell the pressures a man is under from his own colleagues, how much decision rests in his hands once he returns to the political medley of his country'.

The conversation then continues:

[Nehru]: ‘You know, dear lady, I have had much sorrow recently. I suffer with my people—all those families bereft, thousands wounded. So much I have wanted to do for my country, but only in peace can there be constructive achievement’.

[Caroline]: ‘There is so much you have done already. The caste system abolished, the position of women...’.

[Nehru]: ‘Yes, yes’. Impatiently, he interrupted her. ‘All in the name of the law, but in the hearts of the people?’

Later, as the walk and conversation draws to a close, Nehru says; ‘We each have to work towards our destiny. We are born with it; some of us never achieve it. At least I have endeavoured to fulfil mine. I try not to feel that I have failed entirely’.

The novel’s epilogue fast forwards to the 1990s, by which time Elizabeth has grown-up children herself. Her eighteen-year-old son gets his grandmother talking about their years in India. Then he asks: ‘What was Nehru really like? You knew him well, didn’t you?’. Caroline replies: ‘He was a great man, truly great. Not just a good ruler in the ordinary sense. He could have been a dictator, you know. He could sway a crowd of a million with the modulation of his voice, the charm of his manner, and he was handsome, very handsome—his feelings, each change of mood, reflected in his face as he talked’.

She continues: ‘Not everyone liked him, of course. He had political enemies, and men who were jealous of him. He didn’t suffer fools gladly, either. He could be cutting at times, even with women. But he was a wonderful man, all the same. He kept all the best things the British had left and yet was a great patriot: democracy, the British parliamentary system, freedom of speech, of religion, independent status for women.’

Later, the talk turns to the fate of Nehru’s country of and his family, the untimely deaths of Sanjay, Indira, and Rajiv. When the grandson asks whether it was ‘a sort of curse on the whole dynasty’, Lady Caroline replies: ‘Yes, and yet Indira caused her own demise. Panditji would never have shot down the Sikhs in their traditional temple. She lacked her father’s tolerance, his breadth of vision, and his charm’.

The portrait of Nehru in this novel rings true. Claire Crocker captures his charm and charisma, his respect for democracy and diversity, his unique place in the history of his country. The cynic might however say that what the novel really reveals is the appeal that Nehru had for a certain kind of Western woman.

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## CITIES WITHIN A CITY

Delhi is a city I have known all my life. I first knew it from the perspective of a little boy growing up in a mofussil town in north India, who entered a world all too different—and far more sophisticated—when with his parents he crossed the old railway bridge at Jumna Bazaar to reach his country's capital. I then knew it as a student at Delhi University, and still later, as an employee and family man. Now, from my base in Bangalore, I make frequent trips to Delhi. I am there so often—an average of a week a month, at least in the cold season—that my children consider it my second home. And so do I, except that they use the term despairingly, rather than with love.

I have so far spoken of Delhi in the singular, but of course there are cities within this city. There is Lutyens's Delhi, with its barricaded bungalows and broad, tree-lined thoroughfares. There is Purani Dilli, with its narrow streets and ancient monuments and very lively smells. There is South Delhi, with its ostentatiously coloured and monstrously sized homes and its boutique-filled markets. There is Paschimi Dilli, the localities of Karol Bagh and Rajendra Nagar that lie to the west of Connaught Circus, which are properly middle-class, with modest-sized homes and neighbourhood stores. And then there is Jumna Paar, the ever expanding city east of the river, once fine farmland and better bird habitat, but now filled in with housing colonies of varying sizes and shapes.

One might mark out the city territorially, or one might do so in terms of class and status group. On top of the heap sits Sarkari Dilli, composed of the politicians and civil servants who run—or presume to run—the city as well as the country of which it is part. This is a world of power and patronage, of promotions assigned or denied. Then there is Vyapari Dilli, ruled rather by profit and bank accounts (not all of them Swiss), and which—even after the dismantling of the license-permit-quota Raj—still feeds off the favours dished out by those who occupy the offices in the Secretariat. Some of these businessmen have arisen out of what we may choose to call Sharnarti Dilli—that is to say, from the displaced communities of refugees who came into the city after Partition.

Sarkari Dilli was born only after the capital of British India shifted here from Calcutta in 1911. Vyapari Dilli is essentially a post-colonial creation. Older and wiser, but also poorer, than these two cities is Purani Dilli, which we may also call Asli Dilli. This is the Mughal and pre-Mughal city, that lies north of the capital built by the British. Bypassed and superseded by the civil servants and businessmen, and politically and economically subservient to them, this still affects a certain superiority in terms of culture and cuisine. Where the southern parts of the capital speak a crude Hindi and a cruder Punjabi, in Purani Dilli one hears only (or at least mostly) that language of elegance and refinement, Urdu. And despite all the exotic (and exotically priced) new restaurants that pepper the southern suburbs, it remains the conventional wisdom that the authentic food of Delhi is served only in that hole-in-the-wall adjacent to the Jama Masjid, Karim's.

The Delhi I love best is located even further north. This is Vidyarthi Dilli, where the students of the university still study and play truant as they did when I was there thirty years ago. I love this part of Delhi because of the memories, but also because time has stood still. The buildings are much as they were in my day. So is the University Coffee House, and the Ridge, where—despite all the pollution wafting up from the Ring Road—the Crow Pheasant still flies and the Grey Partridge still calls.

At the very bottom of the city's social structure lies Mazdoori Dilli, an amorphous world composed of several million individuals who service their more prosperous compatriots by washing their clothes, cooking their meals, cleaning their streets, and doing other such alienating and ill-paying tasks. Unlike the afsars and vyaparis, unlike the vidyarthi too, the workers and labourers cannot identify with any particular part of the city. They make their home where a space opens up for them—in servants' quarters that lie at the back of grand buildings, in slums built on the river-bank, under flyovers, or even on exposed pavements.

Like all things one knows too well, Delhi fills me with love but also, at times, with disgust. The businessmen are often brash and self-regarding, and sometimes less-than-ethical. The staggering self-importance of the politicians and civil servants is of a piece with their respective callings. Even those Dilliwallahs who are not Secretaries to Government or certified billionaires tend to have an over-developed ego: there is more road rage on a single Delhi street than in most Southern towns. And as one who himself deals with words and ideas, I am dismayed at the vanity of some editors and writers who live in New Delhi. They have fallen prey to the belief, or fantasy, that the importance of their ideas is in exact proportion to their physical proximity to political power.

Intellectuals who live in other national capitals likewise have a highly exaggerated sense of self. Fortunately, Delhi is not Washington. It is not a mere 'capital', but a city of great historical antiquity and cultural depth. Its architectures and lifestyles are at once ancient and colonial and nationalist and post-nationalist. Bored or disgusted with Ministers and millionaires, one can escape into Purani Dilli or the University. In any case, as I have discovered, one can like Delhi all the better once one has made the choice not to live in it. Published in The Hindu, 10/5/2009

## **THE GOOD INDIAN**

One of the forgotten figures of Indian journalism is a man named Syed Abdullah Brelvi. Google 'SA Brelvi' (as I just did), and all that comes up is a road carrying that name in south Bombay. The road was so named in a more enlightened age, when Mumbaikars were free, and willing, to praise those who were not Hindu, and not Maharashtrian either. For Brelvi's contributions to his adopted city were of a very high order. Originally from the U. P. (as his last name indicates), he came to Bombay to find work as a journalist. In 1924 he was appointed editor of the Bombay Chronicle, which had been set up, a decade previously, as a nationalist



rival to the English-owned Times of India. He stayed in that job until his death, eighteen years later.

The role of Brelvi and his newspaper in promoting the freedom struggle is documented in Milton Israel's book *Communications and Power*. The Bombay Chronicle gave early support to Gandhi's campaign against untouchability. It reported sensitively on the living conditions of the textile workers of the city. Like the metropolis of which it was part, the newspaper's concerns were not merely political—thus its sports pages were superb, and it extensively covered the Hindi film industry as well.

Brelvi became editor of the Bombay Chronicle at a time when the freedom struggle was at a crossroads. During the non-co-operation movement of 1920-2 Hindus and Muslims, North Indians and South Indians, had all flocked to the Mahatma's call. But now that unity was coming apart, with individuals returning to the comfort, and insularity, of the communities to which they had originally belonged.

As a patriot whose own life transcended his personal identity, Brelvi was particularly despairing of this trend. In an editorial published in the Bombay Chronicle on 26th May 1926 (and quoted in Israel's book) he asked this poignant and still profoundly relevant question: 'If a modern Diogenes were to hunt out for Indians with his lantern in these days, he would be sure to come across fervid Hindus, bigoted Muslims and fanatical souls deeply engrossed with the problem of tirelessly finding out how unjustly their own particular community was being treated, and he would have to ask in sorrow: "Where are the Indians"?'.

I was reminded of Brelvi's question when reading a letter recently published in Outlook magazine. The magazine had carried an obituary of that other freedom-fighter-turned-editor, H. Y. Sharada Prasad. The correspondent complained that the tribute had overlooked what to him was Sharada Prasad's greatest flaw—namely, his lack of commitment to his fellow Kannadigas. In forty years of living in Delhi, he grumbled, twenty of those spent working with Prime Ministers, Sharada Prasad had never granted any special favours to those who spoke his own language.

What that correspondent saw as a weakness, some others had come to see as the deceased man's singular strength. Born in 1924, Sharada Prasad was a toddler when Brelvi asked that question: 'Where are the Indians?'. But from his days in high school until his death sixty-five years later, Sharada Prasad's conduct was such as to leave no doubt in anyone's mind about his principal identity: This was an Indian. This did not mean that he was not attached to his own culture and traditions. Indeed, he had forgotten more about Kannada literature than that correspondent to Outlook had ever known. He had translated Shivarama Karanth's works into English, thus rendering a far greater service to his fellow Kannadigas than he would have done by getting them government jobs or appointments with Indira Gandhi.

Sharada Prasad's background was musical as well as literary. His father was a famous composer in the Carnatic tradition; his nephew is a leading member of the popular band, Indian Ocean. Sharada Prasad had a fabulous knowledge of Hindustani classical music himself. The greatest writers and singers of modern Karnataka—Shivarama Karanth, D. R. Bendre, Gangubhai Hangal, Mallikarjun Mansur, et. al.—had often stayed at his home, and partaken of his friendship and his wife Kamala's hospitality.

Apart from his mastery of Kannada, Sharada Prasad was fluent in English, Tamil, and Telugu, and he knew some Hindi and Sanskrit as well. In his life and work, he deepened the ties that bound his own state to the states that bordered it, even as he more strongly embedded the South in the great if sometimes troubled country of which it was a part. This was a good Kannadiga who was a better Indian.

The quality of Sharada Prasad's Indian-ness was beautifully expressed in a letter he wrote his parents on his 19th birthday. He was then in jail, as a consequence of his participation in the Quit India movement. The excerpts that follow are from a translation by Sugata Srinivasaraju:

'Many did not expect my life to take this turn. However, inside me, I often felt that I would one day be a soldier in the freedom struggle. ... Whatever pride I can justly corner for my new life I shall stake claim. But this pride shall not be misplaced or cause self-love. On the other hand it will only strengthen my sense of self-dedication..... When we met sometime ago, you had expressed concern that the environment of constant strife in the prison may have an adverse effect on me....On the contrary, I feel prison life has led me to dispassionately think about human nature and its various attributes. Through this I have begun to understand more clearly the greatness and importance of human decency and the devotion with which one needs to pursue it.'

Once he came out of prison, and finished his studies, Sharada Prasad went to Bombay and became a journalist. Later, he moved to Delhi, first to edit the journal of the Planning Commission, Yojana, and then to serve as information adviser to successive Prime Ministers. In retirement he began a newspaper column that acquired a devoted readership. Here, rarely spoke of his time close to power—rather, he wrote about literature and music and the arts, his knowledge made accessible and humanized by an understated tone and a self-deprecatory wit.

A friend of mine once described Sharada Prasad as 'the thinking man's Khushwant Singh'. The characterization was accurate as well as incomplete. For the scholarship was subordinated to an integrity of character and a selfless commitment to the country that he shared with his readers. This quiet, learned, dignified, and always decent man was, above all else, an Indian.

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## THE GANDHI-RESERVOIR

For many years now, my principal teacher on the subject of Mohandas K. Gandhi has been a man who is only incidentally his grandson. To be sure, Gopalkrishna Gandhi does respect and honour the memory of his two grandfathers (the other being C. Rajagopalachari). But his own identity is by no means restricted to the genes he carries. He has written a fine novel in English (Refuge, set in the tea estates of Sri Lanka), translated (into Hindi) Vikram Seth's mammoth A Suitable Boy, founded the now enormously influential Nehru Centre in London, and served as an inspirational High Commissioner in post-apartheid South Africa. At the time of writing he is (in the words of the economist Amartya Sen) 'the enormously popular Governor of West Bengal'. In between (and before) these literary and public duties, he has acquired a deep understanding of modern Indian history, and of the freedom struggle in particular

Over the past two decades, Gopal (as I must, in defiance of protocol, call him) has done me countless good turns. He has directed me to books I did not know of, and clarified doubts relating to Gandhi and the national movement. He is, as it were, my own personalized Wikipedia: like that site he donates his knowledge without a fee, although unlike it he never makes a mistake. Over the years, this column would have contained far more errors had I not had the good fortune to count this outstandingly gifted (and generous) Indian as a friend.

Not long after I first met Gopal, I was due to travel to New York. He suggested that, in view of my interests, I meet someone named Enuga S. Reddy, whom he described as a stalwart of the anti-apartheid struggle. Thus, on a cold, dark, winter evening in New York, I called on a tall, erect, soft-spoken man who for more than twenty years had directed the United Nations Centre against Apartheid. In this time, Mr Reddy worked ceaselessly to wean the Western world away from its support to the racist regime in South Africa, by writing petitions, organizing conferences, lobbying leaders, and hosting South Africans in exile. When we met, in 1992, the struggle had more or less succeeded. Mandela was out of jail, the African National Congress (ANC) was no longer banned, and the first democratic elections were being planned.

Among progressive circles in South Africa E. S. Reddy was (and is) venerated. Some top leaders of the ANC counted him as a friend. So did many lesser activists. I recently met a young man who works in an office of the United Nations in Pretoria (an office that could not have existed during apartheid), and when I mentioned Mr Reddy's name, he sat up straight, instinctively, as a mark of respect to a man whom his father and uncle had visited when in exile and who he had himself later met as a free South African.

Sometime in the 1980s, after he had retired from the U. N., E. S. Reddy began to develop a serious interest in Mahatma Gandhi. It was, at it were, a sort of homecoming, for in his native Andhra he had grown up in a family of Gandhians. He began to scour libraries in Europe and North America for rare materials on or by Gandhi. Later, after the demise of apartheid, his search was extended to libraries and archives in South Africa as well.

Over the past twenty years, E. S. Reddy has collected tens of thousands of pages of new material, including many letters by Gandhi not in his Collected Works, records of his law practice, government reports about his activities, tributes to and interviews with him published in French, German, English, and other languages. Mr Reddy has generously donated copies to archives in India, South Africa, and the United States. Meanwhile, he has himself produced a stream of important books on Gandhi's relations with Americans, Europeans, and South Africans.

Gopal Gandhi has called E. S. Reddy a 'Gandhi-reservoir', a 'one-man Open University on Mahatma Gandhi'. His generosity is legendary; so, too, is his energy. At the age of eighty-two, he made an arduous journey to New Delhi to help the Government of India resolve the mother of all messes created by a careless (and possibly malevolent) reworking of the standard edition of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. A year later I met him at Yale University, where, having taken a train from New York, he had come to deposit new materials on South Africa. Great institutions have benefited from his goodness and wisdom; so, too, have very many ordinary individuals. Every so often, I get an email from Mr Reddy with an attachment containing documents on or about Gandhi that I have not seen or heard of before.

While giving thus to India and Indians, Mr Reddy continues to give to his adopted continent as well. Surfing the Web, I found an account of his work for a website called Aluka.org, which is a digital library of scholarly resources about Africa. In September 2007 Mr Reddy gave lunch in an Indian restaurant in New York to a representative of Aluka named Angelique Mahal. She later wrote in a blog: 'I was ready yesterday to return to him a book he lent to me and he told me to keep it for now and to keep reading it. While we have worked quite closely together these past months I had once mentioned that I previously lived and worked in Burkina Faso, and yesterday he brought me a special report section on Burkina that was in a recent Financial Times. He also gave me a book he edited on Gandhi's speeches and signed it to my friend Angelique. E.S. isn't only a partner for [our] project, he has become a friend and mentor to me.'

As he has been to this writer as well. For, among the many debts I owe Gopal Gandhi, that introduction to E. S. Reddy may very well be the greatest.

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## **CAMUS AND AMERICA**

In the spring of 1946, Albert Camus visited the United States for the first time. He came at the invitation of his American publisher, Alfred Knopf. Like some other French writers he had profoundly ambivalent feelings about this rising superpower. On the one hand, he was attracted to the drive and ingenuity of the Americans; on the other, somewhat repelled by what he saw as their cultural philistinism.

These conflicting and contradictory feelings are captured in letters written by Camus to his French publishers. Soon after he landed in America, he wrote to Michel and Jamie Gallimard that he was not sure whether he was ‘among madmen or the most reasonable people on earth; if life was as easy as they say here or as foolish as it seems; if it is natural that they hire ten people instead of one, without improving the sense of service; if Americans should be called modest, liberal, or conformist; if it is admirable or immaterial that garbage collectors wear elegant clothes; if it is good that the circus here shows ten simultaneous attractions in four different rings so that although you are interested in them all, you can’t see any of them; if it is meaningful that the thousands of youngsters who roller-skated with me the other night to the sound of a giant organ in a sort of indoor bicycle track in a yellowish light seemed as serious and absorbed as if they were solving an eight-degree equation’.

This letter, and others I shall quote presently, are excerpted in Olivier Todd’s magnificent biography of Camus. From that book we also learn that in New York, the writer’s host and escort was the French cultural attaché, a certain Claude Levi-Strauss, a man then somewhat obscure, but who in the fulness of time was to become perhaps the most influential of all modern anthropologists. New York bemused, enchanted, exasperated and puzzled Camus. Thus, as he wrote to his friends the Gallimards,

‘It is beyond human power to give an idea of the curious way in which eight million bison live in this elevated amusement park that geographers call New York, in which 102,000 green, red and yellow beetles that entomologists call taxis circulate, stop, start, and cross one another... using the manners of polite anthills, while 252,000 bison dressed like operetta generals and admirals stand in front of doors of buildings, some to stop the beetles by means of a whistle, and others to open the door for us, and still others to go up and down like multicolored toys in fifty-story cages which commentators call elevators in memory of the Virgin Mary, who didn’t make many disciples here as a virgin, which is a blessing in one sense, because that way no one will be crucified’.

Camus met other writers and publishers, but he also encountered many Americans with no relation to the literary world. From his talks with ordinary folk, he decided that ‘the secret of conversation’ in America is ‘to speak in order to say nothing’. He then wrote out, in English, a typical exchange between a tourist and a local: ‘Good morning—Nice weather today, is it not?—It is.—The spring will be wonderful.—I think so.—How do you like America now, Mr Camus?—I like it very much—You are right. It’s a nice country, is it not?—It is.—Will you come back again—Sure—Etc. etc.’.

After weeks of this kind of chatter, he told the Gallimards, he was impatient to ‘rediscover the flaws and defects of Europe, where conversations have wit, even nasty wit, irony, loftiness, passion, and lies...’.

Camus contrasted the pessimism of Europeans, who looked on life as a tragedy, with the optimism of Americans, for whom life was good and even marvellous. He thought the world needed a synthesis of the two attitudes. For all his sarcasm, he was touched by the friendship he got from America and Americans. When a friend asked why he did not publish an account of his trip through the States, Camus replied: 'Everywhere I went, I received a warm welcome, and everywhere I expressed myself with total freedom. I'm not going to spit in the plate after having eaten the soup, the way [Jean Paul] Sartre did'.

Camus's letters from America spoke directly to this writer, who after a dozen visits to the United States can't quite put in order, or in words, his own, very confused feelings about that country. Like Camus I admire the classlessness of American society (when, if ever, will a black man run for the office of the Presidency of the French Republic?); like him, I am irritated by their small talk and too-easy politeness; like him, I am staggered by the scale of their social, architectural, and political ambition.

Camus's conclusion about America was that it was 'a great country, strong and disciplined in freedom, but ignorant about lots of things, starting with Europe'. To which we may add: and about Africa and Asia, too.

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### **THE CERTITUDE OF CONQUERORS**

I have been reading A. N. Wilson's book *After the Victorians*, a survey of British social and political life in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike some other British historians, Wilson is aware of the fact that at this point in time his country had an empire. His book thus moves between developments at home and at abroad. One chapter or section may focus on debates in the House of Commons; a later chapter or section, on imperial policies in Asia and Africa.

Early in the book, I came across an account of the invasion of Tibet in 1904 by troops of the British Indian Army. The man who led the charge, the maverick adventurer Francis Younghusband, later wrote to his superiors that 'I hope His Majesty's Government will never lose sight of the central fact that British interest in Lhasa is positive, legitimate and inevitable, and that Russian interest is factitious, ulterior, and pursued with unfriendly designs'.

It is in the nature of nationalist ideologues to claim that their nation is always right, and infallible. We may have no doubt that, on their part, the Russians believed that the British interest in Tibet was spurious and even mala fide, whereas they had a legitimate right to nose about in that country. (In fact, both nations had imperialist designs, seeking under the pretext of

national security to assume control, directly or indirectly, over the people and resources of Tibet.)

A little later in the book, Wilson speaks of the rise of Zionism. We learn that Chaim Weizmann, on his first visit to Palestine in 1907, dismissed the Arab residents as ‘primitive people’ and said the Jewish immigrants would be ‘bearers of the torch and the preparers of civilization’. Once more, one sees the nationalist ideologue’s unshakeable faith in the rightness of his cause. The Zionists wished to colonize Palestine, a land they had ancient ties to, but where they had not lived for centuries (or perhaps millenia). But were they to create a state of their own, they had, somehow, to deal with the inconvenient fact that Palestine was already populated by another people, the Palestinian Arabs. So they claimed that part of their Divine Mission to the Promised Land was to uplift the savage. The Arabs, in other words, ought actually to be grateful to those who would dispossess them of their land and homes, since in exchange they would get Civilization.

Reading further into the book, I moved, with A. N. Wilson, to the year 1920. The British, messing around in the Middle East, had taken control of what is now Iraq. The natives protested against the occupation, whereupon the War Secretary in London, a certain Winston Churchill, ordered punitive air raids on Arab villages (the use of poison gas was also considered). The protests intensified, with the rebels blowing up bridges in the Basra area to impede the movement of British troops. Watching the conflict escalate was a young American diplomat, WH Gallacher. In a dispatch he sent back to the United States, Gallacher wrote:

‘In my opinion the trouble all started from the bullheadedness of the British, first in persisting in the belief that the trouble was mainly religious whereas it is entirely political, and secondly in persisting in the belief that they can scare the Arab into submission. The average Englishman seems hurt and surprised, he can hardly believe that others do not like him, so he puts Arabian antipathy down to religion’.

It is said that all historians write with one eye to the present. When he plucked this quote from his sources, I do not know whether Wilson had one eye on the conflict in Iraq today. The parallels are striking indeed. The contenders in the American Presidential race may differ on when and how to withdraw American troops from Iraq, but they are agreed on one thing—that the fault for the mess lies with the Iraqis. Senator Obama thinks that the Iraqis must ‘step up to the plate’ and take responsibility. Senator McCain thinks that the Americans can scare the Iraqis into submission. Meanwhile, the pundits in the Beltway insist that the trouble is entirely religious, whereas in fact it is mostly political, namely, that neither Shia nor Sunni want to be ruled by foreigners in uniform.

As for the average American, he cannot believe that other countries and cultures may actually not like him. So he puts down their antipathy to envy. The Arab is jealous of the United States, which is not merely the most powerful and wealthy country in the world, but also the noblest and

best. We may think that the motives for the invasion of Iraq were strategic and commercial, that is to say, the security of Israel and the control of oil. However, the average American is convinced that the 'Boys' went in to help the Iraqis, to make them less like themselves and more like the average American. If some Iraqis still persist in resisting this make-over, it must be because of their backward and irrational beliefs. Who, in their right mind, would ever suspect or oppose the noblest nation on earth?

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## **MYTHS AND BORDERS**

Foreign dignitaries who come to India almost always fly in to the nation's capital, New Delhi. In April 2005, however, the Prime Minister of the Peoples' Republic of China chose first to visit my home town, Bangalore. The Chinese Ambassador to India explained this reversal of procedure by saying that now 'the "B" of business is more important than the "B" of boundary'.

The statement was premature. For while business co-operation between these two great neighbours continues, now and then the unresolved border dispute does rear its less than smiling head. Books continue to be written arguing the Chinese or Indian case. Governments make statements, some subtle, others threatening, staking their claims to this or that slice of land.

This column shall focus on a small, now forgotten, but nonetheless interesting contribution to the literature on the border dispute. This is a eight page, unsigned and undated note entitled 'Historical Background of the Himalayan Frontiers of India'. However, since it appeared in a White Paper containing materials written between September and November 1959, we can presume that the note was written sometime during those three months. And since it was issued under the stationery of the Historical Division of the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi, we may assume that its author was Sarvepalli Gopal, who was then head of that division.

The note's main purpose was to refute the Chinese claim that the border as it existed was a legacy of British imperialism, that it was forced on a weak and vulnerable China by the white men who then ruled India. The opening sentence of the note made the counter-argument in these words: 'India's northern frontier is a traditional one, in the sense that it has lain approximately where it now runs for nearly three thousand years'.

'The northern frontier of India', the note continued, 'is for much of its length the crest of the Himalayan ranges'. And 'the Himalayas have always dominated Indian life, just as they have dominated the Indian landscape'. The areas along the border were at times independent chiefdoms and at other times part of the Mauryan and Gupta empires, 'but always the people and the rulers regarded themselves as Indians and remained within the Indian fold'.



So, contra the Chinese claim, the note argued that the border had stayed where it was for at least two thousand eight hundred years before the British chose to conquer India. A verse from an ancient Sanskrit text, the Vishnu Purana, was quoted as saying that the country south of the Himalaya and north of the oceans was called 'Bharat', or India. The centrality of the Himalaya to the Indian imagination was then illustrated with reference to the Mahabharata and Ramayana, to the work of the Sanskrit poet Kalidasa, and to the 12th century chronicle Rajatarangini, which even bore witness to cultural exchanges between Kashmir and Assam, 'the two extremities of the northern frontier'.

Thus the literature of ancient and medieval times showed that 'the Himalayas were part of India, and that the people were familiar with it'. The note then added this significant assertion: 'Tibetan and Chinese influences, in fact, never gained a permanent footing on the Indian side of the Himalayas throughout the centuries of Hindu rule in India. The Himalayan regions often changed hands, but it was almost always between Indian rulers'. It was claimed that Ladakh came under Tibetan sway only for a very short period. Meanwhile, on the eastern border, 'Tawang inhabited by the Monbas had been part of India for centuries and Tibetan influence had grown in it only since the early years of the nineteenth century'.

This, then, was the note's unequivocal conclusion: 'Indeed, this broad survey of the frontier areas from the earliest days down to modern times shows that India's present norther frontier is along its whole stretch the historic frontier. Few, if any land frontiers in the world can claim as strong a sanction of long and unbroken tradition'.

I find this note interesting for two reasons. The first is political. The Indian nation came into being on 15th August 1947; but here was a historian reading back into the distant past what was arguably a very contemporary idea of India. To be fair, on their part, the Chinese were (and are) also prone to a similar sleight of hand. Whereas the modern Chinese state really dates back to the revolution of 1949, its claims are often advanced on the basis of cultural and civilizational continuities that are said to have persisted for three thousand years or more.

The note is also interesting for its literary flair. This is in keeping with what we know about the author's other works, as, for example, his three-volume biography of Jawaharlal Nehru. That Sarvepalli Gopal wrote good English is not exactly a new revelation. What is more surprising is his easy and confident use of an ancient tongue. For this note on the border dispute is peppered with verses from Sanskrit texts. It may be that these verses (and their glosses) were supplied by the writer's father, the distinguished philosopher Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who in 1959 was the serving Vice President of the Republic of India.

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## FOUR VIEWS OF HINDUS AND MUSLIMS

I have recently been re-reading Bunch of Thoughts, a collection of talks by M. S. Golwalkar published in Bangalore in 1966. Golwalkar was the long-time sarsanghchalak, or head, of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, an organization that has exercised a substantial influence on the course of modern Indian history. The book's appendix quotes Golwalkar as saying, in 1956, that 'whatever we believed in, the Muslim was wholly hostile to it. If we worship in the temple, he would desecrate it... If we worship cow, he would like to eat it. If we glorify woman as a symbol of sacred motherhood, he would like to molest her. He was tooth and nail opposed to our way of life in all aspects—religious, cultural, social etc. He had imbibed that hostility to the every core'.

Reading these remarks, I was reminded of what a chauvinist on the other side had said sixteen years previously. In March 1940, the Muslim League held its annual meeting in the Punjabi city of Lahore. Muhammad Ali Jinnah delivered the Presidential Address. Here he argued that 'the problem in India is not of an intercommunal but manifestly of an international character, and must be treated as such... It is a dream that Hindus and Muslims can evolve a common nationality, and this misconception of one Indian nation has gone far beyond the limits, and is the cause of most of our troubles, and will lead India to destruction, if we fail to revise our actions in time. The Hindus and Muslims belong to two different religious philosophies, social customs, and literature. They neither intermarry, nor interdine together, and indeed they belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions. Their aspects on and of life are different'.

Both Jinnah, in 1940, and Golwalkar in 1956, appeared to believe that a Hindu is a Hindu, and a Muslim a Muslim, and never the twain shall meet. These two men claimed that their views and mentalities, their styles of worship and ways of living, were so utterly different as to not permit them to live peaceably together. The two communities, in other words, were two nations.

This interpretation of Hindu-Muslim relations was vigorously contested by the great Congressman Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. A week before Jinnah addressed the Muslim League in Lahore, the Congress had convened in the town of Ramgarh, in Bihar. In his Presidential Address, Azad insisted that 'it was India's historic destiny that many human races and cultures should flow to her, finding a home in her hospitable soil, and that many a caravan should find rest here... Eleven hundred years of common history [of Islam and Hinduism] have enriched India with our common achievements. Our languages, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our art, our dress, our manners and customs, the innumerable happenings of our daily life, everything bears the stamp of our joint endeavour... These thousand years of our joint life has moulded us into a common nationality... Whether we like it or not, we have now become an Indian nation, united and indivisible. No fantasy or artificial scheming to separate and divide can break this unity.'

Who, from the historian's point of view, was correct? Were Jinnah and Golwalkar right in believing that Hindus and Muslims had not and could not amicably co-exist? Or was this, as Maulana Azad suggested, a gross misrepresentation, and that on the other hand they had borrowed and exchanged ideas and values and, over the centuries, evolved into a common nationality?

The historical record suggests that neither side had a monopoly of the truth. Down the ages, the interaction of Hindus and Muslims was marked by love and by hate, by conflict as well as by collaboration. There were times when Hindus and Muslims clashed and fought, and other times when they lived together, harmoniously. Some aspects of Indian culture—most notably, classical music—did bear the 'stamp of their joint endeavour'. On the other hand, despite centuries of sharing a common homeland, they did not intermarry or interdine. The chauvinists were wrong in claiming that Hindus and Muslims were fated to be enemies. At the time, the idea, much beloved of romantic nationalists, that they had evolved a shared 'composite culture' was also a simplification of the truth.

In any case, the historical record should be irrelevant to how Hindus and Muslims relate to one another in independent India. For, as Jawaharlal Nehru pointed out in October 1947, 'we have a Muslim minority who are so large in numbers that they cannot, even if they want, go anywhere else. That is a basic fact about which there can be no argument. Whatever the provocation from Pakistan and whatever the indignities and horrors inflicted on non-Muslims there, we have got to deal with this minority in a civilized manner. We must give them security and the rights of citizens in a democratic State.'

Of the four views quoted in this column, the last is the most relevant. Whatever happened—or did not happen—under the rule of Akbar and Aurangzeb in the past, or in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the present, in the Indian Republic every Indian is guaranteed the same rights regardless of his or her faith or belief. That, indeed, is the 'basic fact about which there can be no argument'.

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### **THE WORLD'S FIRST ANTI-DAM MOVEMENT**

Some fifteen years ago, when the Narmada Bachao Andolan was at its height, the ecologist Madhav Gadgil told me about that movement's forgotten predecessor. Back in the 1920s, the peasants of Mulshi Peta, near Pune, had protested against the construction of a dam being built with government support by the industrial house of the Tatas. The struggle was led by Pandurang Mahadev ('Senapati') Bapat, a socialist and nationalist who had been educated in England. Like Medha Patkar of the Narmada Andolan, Bapat was a leader of much charisma and

courage. Like her, he identified completely with the peasants who fought to save their ancestral lands from being submerged.

As a boy growing up in Pune in the 1940s, Madhav Gadgil had known of Senapati Bapat. Later, in the 1960s, he read a book on the Mulshi Satyagraha written by Bapat's associate V. M. Bhuskute. Still later, in the 1990s, Gadgil came across a historical study in Marathi written by Rajendra Vora, who was then the Tilak Professor of Politics at the University of Pune. The ecologist was greatly impressed by Vora's book. It had used a wide range of primary sources to tell a story important in itself, but also of contemporary relevance in view of the parallels it afforded with the Narmada controversy.

With a little help from me, Madhav Gadgil persuaded Rajendra Vora to work on an English version of his book. Professor Vora was, however, a busy man. He was a key member of Lokniti, a countrywide network of political scientists that closely monitors state and national elections. He was also editing a major book on Indian democracy with his colleague Suhas Palshikar. Besides, there were courses to teach and students' theses to evaluate.

In between these various commitments, Rajendra Vora worked on preparing an English version of his book. He chose to add a fresh chapter comparing the Mulshi Satyagraha with the Narmada movement. Earlier this year Professor Vora died of a massive heart attack. Later this year his book will appear in the shops, under the title *The World's First Anti-Dam Movement*. It should appeal to a wide range of audiences—to those interested in Maharashtrian history, in the history of Indian nationalism, in the politics of the environment, in the sociology of peasant protest, or in alternative strategies of economic development.

*The World's First Anti-Dam Movement* begins with a meticulous reconstruction of the agrarian economy of the Mulshi region. Vora tells us of the forms of land tenure, the systems of credit, the crops grown and marketed, and the shrines cared for and worshipped in. He then moves on to the threat to the valley and its peoples by the dam being built by the Tatas. Next, through a skilful use of Marathi sources, he narrates the story of the long (if eventually unsuccessful) struggle aimed at preventing the submergence of the Mulshi valley. We hear of the hunger strikes by the leaders, of the marches and demonstrations by the rank-and-file. The complex connections between the Mulshi peasants and the middle-class nationalists of Pune city are carefully laid out. We learn of the profoundly ambivalent attitude towards the satyagraha of Mahatma Gandhi. Beyond the protest and the struggle, Vora also introduces us to the ideological dimensions of the conflict. He analyses the arguments of the proponents of the dam—who claimed it would generate employment and prosperity for the nation as a whole—and of its opponents, in whose view the project would merely impoverish one set of Indians to benefit another.

Rajendra Vora's book ends with a chapter comparing the Mulshi Satyagraha with the Narmada Bachao Andolan. When the English edition was first proposed, this comparison was uppermost

in his mind (and ours). Now, reading the proofs of his book, I find that it is even more topical than he or we had assumed. In a fascinating passage, Vora writes: ‘As the Satyagrahis saw it, this was not merely a struggle between the Mawalas [as the Mulshi peasants were known] and the [Tata] company, but a struggle between two versions of economics. As long as the government could not prove that the scheme was necessary in the public interest, it had no right to take away anyone’s land. The state may demand everything from the citizens when the security of the nation is in danger or in times of national calamity, but there was no such emergency in the Mulshi case. The submerging of the vast tract of land which was the cradle of Maratha history was therefore an act of tyranny, and injustice. It was being undertaken to fatten the dividends of a private company’.

Rajendra Vora’s book is an impeccable work of historical scholarship. But it also speaks to the present in a way that very few history books do. For the Mulshi dispute was the first intimation of the conflicts that arise when a densely populated and ancient agrarian civilization begins the long and sometimes very painful march to industrialization. The Mulshi Satyagraha was not merely a precursor to the Narmada Bachao Andolan; it anticipated the protests in Singur, Nandigram and a dozen other places, where the state likewise intended to transfer land owned by many small peasants to a single, privately owned, company. Like those other disputes, Mulshi opposed country to city, subsistence to commerce, farmers to factory-owners, the aam admi to the fat cat.

It is a shame that Rajendra Vora did not live long enough to see his book in print. We need now to read it not simply to honour his memory, but to gain a deeper understanding of the past and future of modern India. Published in The Hindu, 6/7/2008

### **EXTREMISM THEN AND NOW**

Six weeks after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, the (then undivided) Communist Party of India held a party congress in Calcutta. The General Secretary of the CPI was P. C. Joshi, who was of the opinion that the party must support Jawaharlal Nehru’s new Government. He believed that Nehru’s Cabinet represented a wide spectrum of public opinion; and that it contained many progressive and patriotic leaders. At this party congress, however, the Joshi line was rejected in favour of a more radical alternative proposed by B. T. Ranadive. This saw a ‘developing revolutionary wave’ within the country. ‘India has never before seen such a sweep’, it argued: ‘never seen the armed forces collapsing so easily before popular pressure; never seen the working classes fighting with such abandon and courage’.

Ranadive claimed that ‘the Central Government, manned by leaders of the National Congress, is the avowed enemy of the national democratic revolution’. In a Political Thesis presented at the meeting in Calcutta, he insisted that ‘the so-called “transfer of power” [in August 1947] was one of the biggest pieces of political and economic appeasement of the bourgeoisie... From the stand

point of the revolution all that it means is that henceforth the bourgeoisie will guard the colonial order'. The Thesis went on: 'The leadership of the Indian National Congress, representing the interests of the Indian capitalist class, thus betrayed the revolutionary movement at a time when it was on the point of overthrowing the imperialist order'. These long-winded sentences were then converted into a catchy slogan: 'Ye Azaadi Jhooti Hai!' (This is a false freedom!).

The Joshi line mandated support for the Nehru Government, as it sought to heal the wounds of Partition, to unite a divided nation, and to construct a democratic social order based on a new Constitution. On the other hand, the Ranadive line mandated a armed struggle led and organized by the CPI, whereby 'the present State will be replaced by a People's Democratic Republic—a republic of workers, peasants and oppressed middle classes'. 'People ask what happens to the Government?', wrote Ranadive: 'Does a time come when somebody else may be prepared to take power and turn this Government out? Yes. That is what we visualise'.

Ranadive's line prevailed in the party Congress, its victory confirmed by a pathetic recantation extracted from P. C. Joshi, where he stated that 'I am not merely the embodiment of right reformism, an arch bureaucrat, but a student intellectual thrown into Party leadership by the accident of history. In all my writings Gandhi, Nehru and Patel rolled into one—could not have desired a better agent inside the Communist Party'.

The line of armed struggle was inspired by a peasant movement in Telengana, where hundreds of villages had passed out of the hands of the Nizam's administration and were now controlled by the Communists. But the Nizam of Hyderabad was not Jawaharlal Nehru. He ran a notoriously authoritarian administration, which enjoyed little support or legitimacy. On the other hand, the Indian Prime Minister was a genuinely popular leader. And the Indian Government as a whole had behind it the halo of a countrywide freedom struggle.

The Communists had grievously under-estimated the strength and legitimacy of the Indian State. In three years of armed struggle they made little progress. In 1951 the Ranadive line was officially disavowed, and the Communists re-entered the democratic process. The mistake had been a costly one—for the Communists (who had lost many of their cadres), and for the Government (which had to divert its energies from the task of nation-building).

In letters written to State Governments in 1948 and 1949, Jawaharlal Nehru warned them to be alert to the threats from the insurrectionists. 'The Communists in India', he wrote, 'have even from the Communist point of view, adopted a very wrong course. They have gone in for terrorist activities and sabotage and raised a volume of feeling against them'. In a letter of 4th June 1949, he noted the parallels between extremists of right and left. 'Communalism and the R.S. S. movement', he observed, 'exhibit an amazing narrowness in outlook, even from the opportunist point of view.' He went on: 'Communism certainly attracts idealists as well as opportunists. But the way it functions is devoid completely of any moral standard or even any thought for India's good.'

I recall these events now because this year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the launching of that failed Communist insurrection. As it happens, there is active, as I write, a fresh left-wing insurgency that seeks likewise to destroy Indian democracy. This is led by the Communist Party of India (Maoist), more familiarly known as the Naxalites. There is then a noticeable similarity between past and present; but there is also a depressing difference. Now, in 2008, India lacks leaders of the calibre and commitment of Jawaharlal Nehru, leaders capable of renewing and reaffirming the democratic centre against the extremists.

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### **THE TATTERED IDEAL**

My friend T. R. Ramakrishna, a sportswriter and sports buff of an uncommon intelligence and sensitivity, recently sent me a book published in the past which speaks directly to the present. The book is called *Mexico 1968*, and it was written by Christopher Brasher, who had been a ‘hare’ in Roger Bannister’s successful attempt to break the four-minute barrier in the mile, later won an Olympic gold medal himself (at Melbourne in 1956, in the 3000 metre steeplechase), and still later become a well known writer and commentator. Assigned to cover the first Olympics to be held in Latin America, Brasher found that ‘they were killing people when I arrived in Mexico City on the night of Wednesday, October 2nd’, 1968.

‘They’ were the Mexican army and the police, and the ‘people’ killed included students, middle class professionals, and workers, who had come together to protest against a corrupt and authoritarian regime. Brasher observed that they had chosen their moment well, as ‘for the first time in many years journalists all over the world descended on Mexico and they were free to report to the world what they saw. This was an opportunity the deep-rooted protest movement could not ignore. Their own press is very much an “Establishment” press—another arm of the ruling P. R. I. (Partido Revolucionario Institucionalista)—the party which has ruled Mexico since 1928. So it is no coincidence that the battle [between the students and the police] took place at a time when the eyes of the world were turned towards Mexico and the world could see that it was not the stable and progressive regime that it is always made out to be’.

The protesters had called for an end to repression and a respect for democratic procedure. They were handled brutally—about eighty were killed, and many hundreds injured. (There were even ripples in New Delhi, where the Mexican Ambassador to India, the poet Octavio Paz, resigned in protest at the killings). Brasher’s gloss on the events is, again, strikingly contemporary. I quote: ‘The Olympics was, after all, their showpiece—their party face. Behind that face there is another stark, tumultuous face—a face that has little regard for the sanctity of human life’.

Brasher had participated in or written about five Olympics, but by now the sheen was beginning to fade. He still had sympathy for his fellow athletes, for whom the Olympics is about ‘the

fulfilment of oneself'. But, as he added immediately afterwards: 'Of course, the world will see it differently: each nation revelling chauvinistically in the victories of its own athletes and mourning when their hopes are dashed'.

As it happened, some American athletes in Mexico also used the opportunity to protest against the excesses of their regime. Thus Tommie Smith and John Carlos, gold and bronze medal winners respectively in the 200 metres, offered the clenched fist salute of the Black Power movement as they walked to the victory rostrum. Then, 'when the National Anthem was played they turned towards the flag, bowed their heads and raised their black-gloved, clenched fists'.

Later, speaking to the press, Tommie Smith remarked that 'if I do something good then I am an American, but if I do something bad then I am a Negro'. Brasher himself offered this comment: 'In their own country they are treated as first-class athletes but as second-class citizens. Many people think that they should not have dragged politics into an Olympic victory, but can human rights be classified as politics?'

When the games finally came to a close, Brasher noted in his diary that 'for the first time in five Olympics I will not be sorry to see the Olympic flame die tomorrow evening'. 'It is nationalism', he wrote, 'which has done most to bring about the rape of the Olympic ideals—nationalism which starts in the stadium at the opening ceremony, is fed to the world by television and which comes back here as this huge weight of responsibility on every team. They are no longer competing man to man. It is now nation versus nation, black versus white, communism versus capitalism'.

Decades earlier, another British writer, George Orwell, had characterized international sport as 'war minus the shooting'. But despite Brasher's depression and Orwell's scorn, I am obliged to draw a more hopeful lesson. The history of the modern Olympics shows that one-party states that host the games seek to project an image of power and pride. But that history also shows that these one-party states are replaced, sooner or later, by democratic, multi-party regimes. Nazi Germany hosted the Olympics in 1936; thirteen years later West Germany had the first of very many free elections. The 1980 Olympics were held in Moscow—nine years later the Soviet Union collapsed. The process was quickest in South Korea—which hosted the Olympics in 1988, and had its first free election in 1992. It was slowest in Mexico, where it was only in 2000 that the PRI was finally booted out of power.

So, nationalism and jingoism notwithstanding, the evidence of history prompts this less than pessimistic prediction—that multi-party democracy will come to China sometime within the next four to thirty-two years.

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## THE CAREER OF A CONCEPT

In an interview given recently by the Pakistani cricketer-politician Imran Khan to Newsweek magazine, he said: ‘My vote bank is increasing’.

To whom do we owe the term ‘vote bank’? I wager few readers of this column can answer the question. Nor can Imran Khan, although—like the rest of us, its use comes naturally to him. The term is very widely used in India, and in Pakistan; apparently, it is well understood by foreign journalists as well (it was reproduced by Newsweek without explanation).

‘Vote bank’ was coined by the sociologist M. N. Srinivas. Born in Mysore in 1916, he was part of an extraordinary generation of writers and artists who lived in that city—among them the novelist R. K. Narayan, the poet-translator A. K. Ramanujam, the cartoonist R. K. Laxman, and the photographer T. S. Satyan. Srinivas took his first degree in Mysore and then went to Bombay for his graduate work. His Ph D thesis was on the religion of the Coorgs (or Kodavas as we would now call them). He then did another Ph D at Oxford, his second thesis a reworking of the first with the help of the (then) advanced theory of structural-functionalism.

The Kodavas in the 1940s were rather isolated and apolitical. However, in the early 1950s Srinivas did a second spell of fieldwork in a peasant village not far from Mysore, which he named ‘Rampura’. This was a time of intense social change. Irrigation water from the Kaveri was making subsistence farmers moderately prosperous. The Constitution of India was giving Dalits rights for the first time in living memory. The elections mandated by the Constitution were bringing party politics into the village.

Srinivas first reported his Rampura research in an long essay he wrote for a seminar organized by the University of Chicago. ‘The Social System of a Mysore Village’ dealt principally with the relations between the different caste groups. A section on ‘patrons and clients’ spoke of the relationship of dependence and obligation between master and servant, landlord and tenant, creditor and debtor; the first term in these relationships always denoting a person of a higher caste than the second. The last paragraph of this section ran as follows:

‘The word “party” has become a Kannada word. Every administrator and politician speaks of “party politics” in villages, and even villagers are often heard saying, “There is too much ‘party’ in such and such a village”. The coming of elections gives fresh opportunities for the crystallization of parties around patrons. Each patron may be said to have a “vote bank” which he can place at the disposal of a provincial or national party for a consideration which is not mentioned but implied. The secret ballot helps to preserve the marginal affiliation of the marginal clients’.

In one crisp paragraph is compressed a mass of sociological detail. We learn of how, so soon after independence, the rhetoric of party competition had seeped into popular discourse. However, some villagers at least were cynical about its effects. There was the ability of a patron

to command the vote of a client whom he employed or loaned money to. There were the pay-offs which resulted from placing this vote-bank at the service of a higher-level politician. And there was the space provided by the secret ballot for at least some villagers to vote according to their personal preference rather than the social relationships in which they were embedded.

How does this description hold up fifty years later? The competition between parties in rural Karnataka, as in the rest of India, has become more intense. At the same time, the cynicism about politics and politicians has increased. The favours granted to those who mobilize votes have possibly gained in value. What has changed is the ability of patrons to command the loyalty of their clients. In the 1950s, if a Vokkaliga peasant told his Dalit labourer to affix his thumb impression on the symbol of a particular party, then he was very likely to do so. Now, however, he is more prone to vote according to the wishes and desires of his fellow Dalits.

We still use the term coined by Srinivas; however, we mostly mean it now to capture a solidarity that is horizontal rather than vertical. ‘Vote bank’ is not what a single patron commands; rather it denotes a collective political prference exercised by a particular interest group. In India, this interest is defined principally by primordial identity—of caste or religion or language. But one can also think of ‘vote banks’ being constituted by shared material or moral interests. Thus, for instance, a politician may promise to cut taxes to cultivate a vote-bank of middle-class tax payers. Or he may promise to ban abortion so as to placate those who believe that the foetus is a living being.

Coined to capture the goings-on in a single Mysore village, the concept is flexible enough to capture key elements in democratic politics everywhere—in Pakistan as well as in India, in North America as much as in South Africa. Before his death in 1999 Srinivas had been witness to this ubiquitous use; although (as a proud and possessive scholar) he liked to claim its ownership whenever he could. But I think he would have been especially tickled by Imran Khan’s use of the term, and unconcerned—at least in this case—about its paternity being left vague. For, as a good Mysorean and better Indian, M. N. Srinivas had a deep love of the game of cricket.

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## **THE LUCK OF THE SOUTH**

One of my all-time favourite places is the temple of Somanathapura. It is less visited than other famous Hoysala shrines such as Belur and Halebidu, in part because it lies off the beaten track. The words ‘beaten’ and ‘track’ need to be taken literally. For two-thirds of the way one drives along the (now fairly decent) Mysore road, till at Maddur one turns left to bump and belch along some thirty miles of pot-holes, craters, ditches, and worse. But whoever said that the path

to the Almighty was easy? For at journey's end lies this jewel of a temple, with no worship or worshippers, and with its exquisite sculptures still more-or-less intact.

Halfway between Maddur and Somanathapura lies the village of Malavalli. It has a very large tank, in which breed all kinds of birds, from humdrum herons to the glorious Painted Stork. The village appears fleetingly in the old Gazetteers, as a place near which Tipu Sultan's men once fought a bloody battle with British forces. But as one passes Malavalli nowadays, viewing with pleasure its lovely landscape, the paddy fields and the ponds and the birds, who would think that a gun was ever fired in anger there?

Malavalli has been untouched by war for the past two hundred years; so, in fact, has the whole of South India. This fact needs to be more carefully pondered by professional historians as well as by ordinary citizens. For of which other part of India, or indeed of the world, could one say that two centuries have passed since the cannons boomed and the tanks roared? In this respect we South Indians have been very fortunate indeed.

The first part of India to fall under the British yoke was the east. But the region was by no means at peace. In the 19th century there were major tribal and peasant rebellions, while the first half of the 20th century saw a wave of communal riots culminating in the horrors of Partition. Then, in 1970-1, there were the troubles in East Pakistan, which saw the flight of nearly 10 million refugees into eastern India. In December 1971, there was war itself.

The last part of India to be subdued by the British was the north. The Sikhs fought on till the 1830s. So did the Sindhis. Then came the great uprising of 1857 and, a mere ninety years later, the mass killings and exchanges of population associated with the division of the Punjab. The sovereign nations of India and Pakistan were created, but the fighting did not stop. It was North India which bore the brunt of the wars of 1947-8, 1965, and 1971, as well as the skirmish of 1999.

The west of India was conquered after Tipu and before Ranjit Singh. It was in 1818 that the Peshwas were finally defeated, and the city of Pune came under British occupation. But the Pax Britannica did not necessarily mean the coming of social peace. After the north, it was the west which was the epicentre of the rebellion of 1857. After the north, it was the west which saw, at close quarters, the battles between India and Pakistan. After the north it was the west which has witnessed the most violence between Hindus and Muslims.

Leave India for a moment, and cast your eye on some other parts of the globe. The vast continents of Africa and Latin America have seen civil war upon civil war for pretty much the last two hundred years. The bloodshed of the American Civil War (the capitals denoting the uniqueness of its horrors) is beyond the imagination of the ordinary Indian. Millions of Americans also died in the two World Wars, and many thousands more in later conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, and now, Iraq.

The continent most affected by warfare in modern times is, of course, Europe. The two most horrific wars in human history were fought mostly on its soil. These were in the 20th centuries; but the Europeans had been battering one another all through the 19th and 18th centuries as well.

Wars, big and small, affect the civilian population in a variety of ways. Tanks approach them on the ground; bombs fall on them from the sky. Their young men are recruited as cannon-fodder; their young women avariciously set upon by conquerors. Shortages and scarcities abound.

Of all the regions of the world, perhaps only Oceania has been as lucky as South India. Since the early battles between the European colonizers and the indigenous communities, the massed guns have been silent there too. But they have been used elsewhere—thus Australians and New Zealanders died in their tens of thousands during the two World Wars, fighting to protect their British monarch. This massive loss of life scarred generations of their countrymen, those who had lost sons and fathers in lands faraway.

Of all the regions of India and the world, only we in the South have been exempt for so long from the horrors of war and civil strife.

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### **THE DAY EDWINA DIED**

The Indian public in general, and the Indian press in particular, has shown a keen and perhaps excessive interest in the relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru and Edwina Mountbatten. That they were intimates is not to be doubted—but did the bonds ever move from the merely emotional to the tellingly physical? That one was the Prime Minister of India and the other the wife of the Governor-General of India we know—but was Nehru ever influenced in his policies by the desires and preferences of his friend Edwina?

Despite the column inches devoted to these matters in the press, and the interrogations and speculations on radio and television, we still don't really know. I do not propose here to provide definitive answers to those questions. But I do wish to supply an interesting and possibly telling sidelight on the Nehru-Edwina friendship. The material comes from the diaries of Walter Crocker, who served two long terms as High Commissioner of Australia in New Delhi, and later published an incisive political biography of Nehru.

On the 21st of February 1960, Edwina Mountbatten died in her sleep while on a visit to Borneo. Shortly after midday, the news was communicated to Walter Crocker by his friend Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the veteran Gandhian and high-ranking Minister in the Union Government. That evening the Australian diplomat was due to attend a dinner at Hyderabad House in honour of the historian Arnold Toynbee. Toynbee had already published several volumes of his best-selling survey of the rise and fall of civilizations. He was in Delhi at the invitation of the Indian Council

for Cultural Relations, who had asked him to deliver the first of what was to become an annual lecture in memory of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

As Crocker wrote in his diary that night, by the time he reached Hyderabad House, ‘Nehru was there. He must have had strong feelings about the utterly sudden death of Lady M[ountbatten] but he showed no sign of it. He sat next to Toynbee at dinner and for a while was silent, but for the rest of the meal was plunged into a lively conversation with him. As usual everyone around looked by comparison, strained, inhibited, dim. There was not a hint of self-consciousness or fear or hesitation about him. His physical handsomeness in itself was dominating—the eyes, the golden-light brown and healthy skin, the healthy hair... What a man, whatever his policies’.

As a first-hand account of how Jawaharlal Nehru felt and acted the day Edwina Mountbatten died, this is striking indeed. With an almost magisterial self-will, Nehru appears to have kept his thoughts (and we may presume, his grief) hidden within himself. A honoured guest had come to town, and the Prime Minister’s duty was to entertain and amuse him. At the time, Toynbee had a colossal popular following. Never since (and rarely before) has a mere historian been treated with such deference around the globe or so readily acknowledged as an oracle. That evening at Hyderabad House, the others around the table, whether Indian or Western, were inhibited, even tongue-tied. It was only the Prime Minister who could engage Toynbee in a conversation of intellectual equals. His dearest friend had just died: but his office, and his country, demanded of Nehru that he set aside his personal grief and act as was expected of him.

There is some talk that Nehru mortgaged Indian interests in Kashmir at the behest of his English friend (and possibly lover). Such speculation has not yet been backed by concrete evidence. On the other hand, reading Crocker’s account of his conduct in public on 21st September 1960, it is hard to believe that while Edwina was alive, Nehru would have abandoned principle and patriotism in deference to her whims and charms.

We now know, courtesy the unpublished diaries of an Australian diplomat, how Nehru behaved the day Edwina died. How Edwina might have behaved had her dearest friend predeceased her can never be known. Let me supply, as a wholly inadequate substitute, the reactions of the aforementioned diarist. In May 1964 Walter Crocker was serving as Australian Ambassador to the Netherlands. On the morning of the 27th, he got a call telling him that Nehru had passed away in New Delhi. Late that night he made the following entry in his diary:

‘Not much else in my mind for the rest of the day. My Indian friends and associates, who meant so much to me for the last 12 years, are struck down, one by one. Last week it was [the diplomat] Harish[war] Dayal. Not long before that it was [the civil servant] Sir V. T. [Krishnamachari] and then [the historian K. M.] Panikkar. And a couple of months ago it was [Rajkumari] Amrit [Kaur]. Now the beacon light itself has gone out’.

It only remains for me to repeat the (well deserved) accolades—what a man (whatever his policies), the beacon light itself. Published in The Hindu, 30/9/2007

## CHURCHILL PÈRE AND INDIA

In the last days of 1884, an English politician named Randolph Churchill landed in Bombay. Then in his mid thirties, he was a rising star of the Conservative Party, who had made his name by a series of withering attacks on the policies in Africa of the great Liberal Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone. Churchill was a self-proclaimed 'Tory Democrat', who wished his party to abandon its defence of tradition and privilege and take up more progressive positions and affiliations.

Randolph Churchill spent six weeks in India, travelling across the sub-continent, calling at the colonial port cities but also visiting the princely states, and taking in some shikar in the jungles along the way. His experiences are described in a series of letters he wrote his American wife. Three days after landing he told her that 'I have not done any sight-seeing yet, except going into Bombay and walking about the streets and looking at the people, an endless source of interest'. A week later he was taken by 'a great Parsee', the millionaire businessman Sir Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy, to see the Towers of Silence. 'I was asked to write my opinion of their process in their books', wrote Churchill to his wife, 'and composed a highly qualified and ambiguous impression which would have done credit to Gladstone'.

From Bombay, Randolph Churchill proceeded into the Indian heartland. The Holkar of Indore arranged a hunt for him, but the cheetah sent to catch blackbuck 'was sulky and would not run well'. Another hunt was arranged in the forests of Dudhwa, in the Himalayan terai. Here too not many animals were shot, but the English politician did get to ride an elephant, of which experience he wrote:

'I think an elephant is the best mode of conveyance I know. He cannot come to grief; he never tumbles down nor runs away... You would not believe what steep places they get up and down or what thick, almost impenetrable jungle they go through. If a tree is in the way, and not too large a one, they pull it down; if a branch hangs too low for the howdah to go under, they break it off. They are certainly wonderful animals, and life in many parts of India would be impossible without them.'

This was written on 1st February 1885; a week later, writing from Government House, Calcutta, Churchill reported that that he at last 'had the great good fortune to kill a tiger' (but we know not where). From the centre of the Raj he moved to Rewah, for more shooting, before returning east to the Benares, which (unsurprisingly) he found to be 'the most distinctly Hindoo city I have yet seen; old and curious in every part'. He attended a nautch party at the palace of the Maharaja, and then took a ride down the river, of which he penned an even better account than of his ride on an elephant:

'Later, we took a boat, came down the Ganges, and saw all the Benares people bathing—thousands. As you know, this is part of their religion. The water is very dirty, but they lap up quantities of it, as it is very "holy"; also there were to be seen the burning Ghats, where all the

dead are cremated. There were five bodies burning, each on its own little pile of faggots; but the whole sight was most curious and I am going again this morning to have another look. Benares is a very prosperous city, as all the rich people from all parts of India come here to spend the end of their days. Any Hindoo who dies at Benares, and whose ashes are thrown into the Ganges, goes right bang up to heaven without stopping, no matter how great a rascal he may have been. I think the Grand Old Man (i.e. Gladstone] ought to come here; it is his best chance’.

These views, on India and Indians, must be considered rather advanced for their time. Certainly, as compared to the common or garden variety of imperialist Randolph Churchill displayed an uncommon curiosity about the ritual practices of the subject population. The summer after his trip, the Liberals were defeated in a General Election, and Randolph Churchill became Secretary of State for India. A year later he impulsively resigned, citing disagreements with colleagues. He continued as a (very vocal) Member of Parliament, but never held office again. He died in January 1895, three weeks short of his forty-sixth birthday.

Randolph Churchill’s son lived twice as long as he did, long enough to serve two terms as Prime Minister and to be acknowledged as the ‘saviour of his country’. But whatever Winston Churchill’s deeds in and on behalf of Great Britain, so far as India was concerned he was an old-fashioned, narrow-minded, imperialist. While living here as an army officer in the 1890s he showed no interest in the people or landscape of the sub-continent. Later, as a politician in Opposition, he opposed talks with Gandhi; still later, as Prime Minister during the Second World War, he worked very hard to delay the granting of independence to India. Indians themselves he regarded as a ‘beastly people’ with a ‘beastly religion’. It is a relief to know that these prejudices were not shared or anticipated by his father.

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## **THE LAST QUAKER IN INDIA**

On London’s busy Euston Road, opposite the even busier Euston Station, stands a stone building supported by two large pillars. This is Friends House, the headquarters of the Society of Friends, who are also known as the Quakers. Now, in 2007, the entry to the premises is through the garden at the side; but when Mahatma Gandhi visited it in 1931 he must surely have come in through the big wooden doors in front.

In the cumulative index to the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi there are ten references under the entry ‘Quakers’. To properly appreciate the importance of the Society in Gandhi’s life, however, these must be supplemented by the references to individual Quakers: for example, the 88 to Horace Alexander, the 198 to Agatha Harrison, the 102 to Muriel Lester, the 43 to Reginald Reynolds, and the 42 to S. E. Stokes.

These five Quakers all played a sterling role in advancing the Gandhian cause. Agatha Harrison and Muriel Lester were based in London, where they ran the very active Friends of India Society, mobilizing British public opinion in favour of the freedom of India. Horace Alexander and Reginald Reynolds were wandering nomads, travelling from England to India, where they played crucial mediatory roles between Gandhi and the officials of the Raj. Samuel (later Satyanand) Stokes was based wholly in India, in the hills of Himachal, where he ran schools, fought against forced labour, planted apples, and went to jail during the non-co-operation movement.

In fact, the Quaker connection to this country long predates Gandhi. As related by Marjorie Sykes in her book *An Indian Tapestry*, the first Quaker came to India in 1657, soon after the Society was formed. Through the centuries Quakers have lived in India, sometimes as servants of the Company and the Raj, at other times as servants of the people. Sykes's book documents (as the sub-title says), 'Quaker threads in the history of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, from the seventeenth century to Independence'. We learn here of the work done by Quakers in running schools, colleges, hospitals, libraries, children's clubs, and farms.

Characteristically, we learn little about the author himself. Marjorie Sykes herself spent sixty years in India, living, labouring, loving. She knew Gandhi (meriting four references in the *Collected Works*!) and, much better, Rabindranath Tagore. She worked for long periods in Santiniketan, where she taught, translated some of Tagore's plays, and co-authored a major biography of Gandhi's and Tagore's friend Charles Freer Andrews. Later, she ran a girls' school in the Niligiri hills. In between her stints in east and south she spent time in the Narmada valley, based in the Quaker settlement at Rasulia (which was established as long ago as 1891). Here she promoted sustainable agriculture (among other things, her Centre published the Indian edition of Fukuoka's classic *One Straw Revolution*) and vigorously opposed the attempts to drown the valley in a series of large dams.

Marjorie Sykes's history ends with Independence. It thus does not take into account her own work in the Narmada valley, or the work, down in Kerala, of the architect Laurie Baker. Baker, who died on the first day of April, aged ninety, was a pioneer of low-cost and eco-friendly architecture. As his biographer Gautam Bhatia writes, although 'Baker's work appears to emanate from the functional doctrines of the modernist movement, it is largely the outcome of his Quaker past'. In his life and work was manifest this 'rigorous Quaker upbringing, with its emphasis on simplicity and austerity, its rejection of all ornament and luxury as sinful self-indulgence... '.

Baker is best known for the thousands of buildings he built in Kerala, among them houses, anganwadis, churches, and at least one fishing village. He also designed the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, where (owing to the artfulness of Baker's designs) the costs were actually much less than budgeted—allowing the Centre to build a world-class library with the money saved. Before he moved to Kerala, Baker had lived in the Kumaon hills, where he helped his doctor-wife run a hospital for the hill villagers.



When Baker first came out to India in 1945, he met Mahatma Gandhi, in a chance encounter which (to quote his biographer) 'seems to have made a great impact on his architecture, as Gandhi's ideologies were to influence him in all his life'. It was surely the Gandhian in him that moved him to write what was the first critical article to appear after the atomic tests of May 1998. Immediately after the tests, the commentary in the newspapers was uniformly eulogistic. Politicians strutted about in Parliament, and scientists posed for photographs dressed in military attire. The first note of dissent was struck by Baker. In a brilliant brief article, he pointed out that the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, had asked of Indian scientists that their work be non-violent, that it be environmentally benign, and that it enhance the welfare and happiness of the poor.

The atom bomb, Indian or otherwise, fails these three tests of a Gandhian science. By those same criteria, the science practiced by the last Quaker in India comes out with flying colours.

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### **SCOTTISH INTERNATIONALIST**

'India lives in her villages', said Mahatma Gandhi. This is an injunction that the environmental movement in India has taken very seriously indeed. Thus scholars and activists have argued about such matters as the commercial bias in forest policy, the disappearance of species, the drying up of village tanks, and the displacement of adivasis by large dams.

These are all important issues, deserving careful attention and concerted action. Still, it is striking how the environmental problems of the cities have received scant attention in comparison. For India lives in her cities and towns, too, in cities and towns plagued by hazardous work conditions, insanitary living conditions, high rates of air and water pollution, and the like.

In addressing these problems today, we can seek inspiration in the work of a remarkable urban environmentalist of the past. His name was Patrick Geddes, and he was born in 1854, in Scotland. After making a considerable reputation as a town planner in Europe, he came to India in 1914, at the age of sixty. For the next eight years Geddes was based in the sub-continent, studying and writing about the culture and ecology of the Indian city.

Geddes wrote nearly fifty town plans in India, some no more than four or five pages long, others printed in more than one bulky volume. Running through these plans are three central themes. The first I shall term 'Respect for Nature'. His approach to town planning was deeply ecological, emphasizing a city's relationship to its water sources, the promotion of parks and trees, the importance of recycling, and the lessening of dependence on the resources of the hinterland. Particularly noteworthy is what he says about wells. These, he says, should 'be regarded as a valuable reserve to the existing water supplies, even if these be efficient.' As he continues, 'any

and every water system occasionally goes out of order, and is open to accidents and injuries of very many kinds; and in these old wells we inherit an ancient policy, of life insurance, of a very real kind, and one far too valuable to be abandoned'. Geddes was writing here about Thane, but his words might be pasted above the office desks of planners working today in Chennai, Hyderabad, and a dozen other cities of India.

The second of Geddes's themes is what I call 'Respect for Democracy'. He insisted that the residents of a city must help design plans made for them. His own plans paid special attention to the needs of such disadvantaged groups as women, children, and low castes. And he was implacably opposed to 'sweeping clearances and vigorous demolitions [that] seem [to be] coming fully in fashion...'. In the Changan Mohalla of Lahore, he was appalled by a scheme for re-development which planned to destroy five Mosques, two Dharamsalas, tombs and temples, and shops and dwellings. It spared only one building: the Police Station.

Geddes condemned this scheme as an 'indiscriminate destruction of the whole past labour and industry of men, of all buildings good, bad and indifferent, and with these, of all their human values and associations, profane and sacred, Police Office only excepted!' His ground rule for clearance and eviction was that 'these must in any and every case be deprecated until and unless new and adequate location is provided'—words that, in a just world, would guide the actions not only of the town planner, but of the dam engineer and missile builder as well.

The third of Geddes's core ideas may be termed the 'Respect for Tradition'. After a visit to Nadiad, in Gujarat, he said the town planner must have an 'appreciation of all that is best in the old domestic architecture of Indian cities and of renewing this where it has fallen away'. It was absurd to destroy, as being 'out of date, fine old carven housefronts, which Western museums would treasure and Western artists be proud to emulate'. He once offered a five-word motto which those interested in Heritage Preservation might adopt as their own, namely: 'To Postpone is to Conserve'.

Patrick Geddes was that oxymoron, a Scottish internationalist. He worked for many years in his native land, but also had a notable influence on the Continent. He helped plan a university in Palestine, and did some of his best work in India. To press for the continuing relevance of that work I can do no worse than quote Geddes's great American disciple, Lewis Mumford. Writing some two decades after his mentor's death, Mumford remarked that

'What Geddes's outlook and method contribute to the planning of today, are precisely the elements that the administrator and bureaucrat, in the interests of economy or efficiency, are tempted to leave out: time, patience, loving care of detail, a watchful inter-relation of past and future, an insistence upon the human scale and the human purpose [above] merely mechanical requirements: finally a willingness to leave an essential part of the process to those who are most intimately concerned with it: the ultimate consumers or citizens.'

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## KASHMIR THEN AS NOW

Among the minor figures of modern Indian history, one who has long intrigued me is the civil servant and journalist A. D. Gorwala. Born in 1900, Gorwala studied in Bombay and England before joining the Indian Civil Service in 1924. He served in rural Sindh and in the Secretariat, acquiring a high reputation for efficiency and a higher one for integrity. In 1945 Gorwala and his fellow Cambridge man, the economist D. R. Gadgil, were asked to advise the Bombay Government on their food policy in a time of scarcity. That sceptic as regards state intervention, Mahatma Gandhi, was opposed to rationing, but Gadgil and Gorwala successfully overruled him, arguing that the poor lacked the capacity to buy grain in the market and, especially, the black market. To save them from starvation it was thus necessary for the government to take over the distribution of food.

Soon after Independence, Gorwala resigned from the Indian Civil Service. He wrote for various newspapers and journals before, in 1960, starting his own little magazine, with the simple title of Opinion. Most of this was written by Gorwala himself, and most of it dealt with the corruptions of the State, whether petty or portentous.

Opinion had a small but devoted readership. It ran more-or-less smoothly for fifteen years, until Mrs Indira Gandhi imposed her Emergency, and came down hard on the freedom of the press. A year into the Emergency, Opinion was ordered to shut down, but Gorwala was able to print one last issue where he observed that 'the current Indira regime, founded on June 26, 1975, was born through lies, nurtured by lies, and flourishes by lies. The essential ingredient of its being is the lie. Consequently, to have a truth-loving, straight-thinking journal examine it week after week and point out its falsehoods becomes intolerable to it.'

I knew of A. D. Gorwala's battles with Gandhis great and Gandhis small. In other words, I knew already of his courage, but recently I came across a striking illustration of his other notable attribute, wisdom. In a piece he wrote for the Bombay weekly Current in September 1951, Gorwala wryly anatomized the Kashmir dispute in terms and phrases that remain strikingly relevant today. This, then, is how this impartial Indian summarized the positions and prejudices of the disputants:

'Says the Pakistan Government: The bulk of the inhabitants of Kashmir are Muslims. It is a Muslim province. Pakistan is a Muslim state. Kashmir is contiguous to Pakistan. Its people wish to belong to Pakistan. It must belong to Pakistan.

Says the Indian Government: The fact that the majority of Kashmiris are Muslims has nothing to do with the country which Kashmir joins. The ruler of Kashmir acceded to India and the real leaders of the people of Kashmir, Muslims themselves, have clearly stated their desire to remain with India. Kashmir, therefore, must come to India. It is, in fact, a part of India. The part held by

Pakistan is wrongly seized by aggression and must be vacated in favour of the real government. Then, we shall have a plebiscite to let the people of Kashmir decide their future.

Says the Pakistan Government: What is the use of such a plebiscite? The result will be a foregone conclusion. For a proper plebiscite, take away your soldiers, remove the government, have a neutral authority in power.

Says the Indian Government: Don't be silly. Who are you to talk anyway? You let raiders into the land to loot and rape and helped them with your own troops. You are the worst type of aggressor. Get out of Kashmir and stay out. We are not going to let you interfere.

Says the Pakistan Government: But this is absurd. You plotted with the Maharaja. The people you call leaders are really your stooges. There must be a proper plebiscite. Our people are getting very impatient. We clench our fists at you. If you don't listen and the United Nations don't make you, we shall seek the arbitrament of war.

Says the Indian Government: Your allegations are false. If you restart fighting in Kashmir, prepare for an attack on Pakistan. In order to show that we are in earnest, we are moving troops very near your borders.

Says the Pakistan Government: This is fantastic. You are preparing for aggression. This is really terrible. Withdraw your troops.

Says the Indian Government: We won't. It is time you learnt to behave.'

Reading this summary of contending positions, one is reminded of the saying: The more things change, the more they stay the same. For, with a word or phrase amended here and there, this is how the parties still see their 'core dispute', fully fifty-five years later. But one is also reminded of what Sheikh Abdullah once said of the Valley of Kashmir, that it was a beautiful damsel being fought over by two violent and equally unpleasant suitors.

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## **RECORDING GANDHI**

Some months ago, I wrote in these columns about Nirmal Kumar Bose, the anthropologist who worked with Mahatma Gandhi and also wrote about him. That piece attracted the attention of a resident of Bangalore named Biren Das, whom I knew of as a patron of classical music and as the great-grandson of the inventor of the roshogoola. What I did not know was that Mr Das was also a family friend of N. K. Bose. On reading my column, he gifted me a CD with two rare recordings of Bose speaking about Gandhi, in the American town of Madison in 1958. Listening to the CD has provided me more illumination than many of the books about Gandhi that I have read.

‘Despite the greatness with which we clothe him’, remarks Bose, ‘Gandhi was intensely human’. His own talks succeed splendidly in humanizing Gandhi, with personal recollection skilfully mixed with analytical judgements on the Mahatma’s thought and practice. Bose gave up a great deal to join Gandhi—his career, a family life—but he would not give up his scholarly detachment or sense of humour, both of which are on display here. (It is striking, for instance, that he never uses the appellation ‘Mahatma’, speaking throughout of ‘Gandhi’.)

The anthropologist begins by recalling his first acquaintance with Gandhi, which was through his writings. As a student at Calcutta University, he subscribed to the journal *Young India*, where the Mahatma put forward his views on politics and social reform, and invited arguments and disagreements.

Bose started reading Gandhi in the early 1920s. However, they met only in 1934, when the Mahatma was touring rural Bengal. There is a vivid description here of that first meeting. ‘The only slavery Gandhi admitted to’, says Bose, ‘was that of time’. Invited to join Gandhi on his morning walk, the anthropologist had as his companion the great Pathan exponent of non-violence, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Bose was at least six inches taller than the Mahatma, and Ghaffar Khan a further foot taller still. Yet, as he recalls, the two were hard put to keep pace with Gandhi. They could, however, gather their breath when Gandhi stopped to collect stones which would later be used to build a road to the ashram where he was staying.

Bose’s most intense engagement with Gandhi was when he walked with him through Noakhali in 1946-7. As recollected here, the Mahatma asked him to become his secretary and interpreter on the grounds that of all his Bengali associates Bose had the job that was most dispensable. Gandhi could scarcely ask a social worker or medical doctor to abandon what he was doing, while the work of a university lecturer was, in comparison, less than essential.

While on the road, Bose and Gandhi had many interesting arguments. When the anthropologist said he did not believe in God, Gandhi asked what he did believe in. The pursuit of truth, he answered. (That was a faith the Mahatma was prepared to accept, and one he followed himself, except that he usually dignified it with a capital letter, as Truth.)

As Bose recalls, Gandhi’s message to Bengal after the riots was that ‘it was not consolation that will save us, but courage’. There is a moving account of Gandhi’s work in restoring communal peace in Calcutta during August/September 1947. Several times during his talk Bose says: ‘I bore witness to that’. He did, indeed. For Bose was with Gandhi during what might have been the most heroic months of a very heroic life. With his skill as a scholar and writer—and, as this tape show, speaker—he recorded them, with great sensitivity and insight, for the benefit of posterity.

Bose also speaks about Mahatma Gandhi’s attitude towards India’s colonial rulers. The nationalist movement, insisted Gandhi, was against British rule, but not against Britain, and certainly not against Englishmen. Nor, he believed, should India win its freedom merely in order

to oppress and exploit other countries in turn. Reflecting on the meaning and efficacy of non violence, Bose asks a question whose answer is perhaps contained in the manner of its posing: 'Does a person have the right to kill another human being simply on account of a difference of opinion?'

On the evidence of these talks Bose must have been a most impressive speaker, with a voice that was clear, powerful, and resonant. The talks were originally recorded on tape, and later transferred to a Compact Disc. When I opened the CD on a computer, the screen announced that this was an 'Unknown Album', featuring the work of an 'Unknown Artist'. That is how the Windows programme would, I suppose, designate any disc that is not pre-recorded or which it does not recognize. It is for the listener to supply the facts that the 'artist' was once well known as an anthropologist and writer, and that the 'unknown' album contains a priceless eyewitness account of the life and work of the greatest Indian of modern times.

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### **BISMILLAH OF BANARAS**

In a delicious paradox that can only be Indian, the man who best embodied the spirit of the holy Hindu city of Banaras was a Muslim. Although he was born in Bihar, Bismillah Khan moved to Banaras as a young man, and lived there until he died, spending some seven decades in an old, crumbling haveli, surrounded by his shehnais, a large extended family, and an even larger circle of hangers-on.

Bismillah came from a family of musicians who had traditionally been employed by the Kashi Viswanath Mandir in Banaras. His own identification with the city went beyond that. He went here and there to perform, but always returned to the soil, the air, and the water that nourished him and his craft. As he liked to say, he was a worshipper of both Allah and Saraswati. Once, a rich American university invited Bismillah to be their musician-in-residence, and asked him to state his terms. Negotiations were abruptly concluded when the musician replied that he would only come if he could bring his beloved Ganga with him.

That a Muslim musician personified Kashi so stuck in the gullets of Hindu bigots. Not that the orthodox Muslims had much time for Bismillah either. In the wonderful documentary that Nasreen Munni Kabir made of him—whose title I have stolen for this column—Bismillah explains how for some mullahs, music is the work of the Devil, 'haram'. 'Harrrraaam', he repeats, and then cackles delightedly. Then there was the little ear-ring Bismillah wore, this in violation of some versions of Islam yet a mark of the catholicism of his own, uniquely inclusive, spiritual tradition.

I personally owe Bismillah Khan a great deal, owe him my interest in classical music in fact. As a schoolboy I listened to film music and Western pop music, and nothing else. Awake one night owing to an attack of asthma, I was fiddling with the radio when I chanced upon the music of the shehnai. I listened, at first with boredom, and then with an increasing enchantment. Within minutes I could tell that this was altogether superior to the stuff I used to hear on the BBC's 'Top Twenty' or Radio Ceylon's 'Binaca Geet Mala'. As the bronchodilators took effect and my breath eased, I immersed myself in the music. When it ended half-an-hour later, the announcer informed us that we had just heard Raga Durga, played on the shehnai by Ustad Bismillah Khan.

So, that was my first experience of Bismillah—listening to him between 2.30 and 3 a.m. on the General Overseas Service of All India Radio. I graduated to listening to him in the more conventional way—by going to evening concerts where he played. In the five years I spent in Delhi University I must have heard him play on at least four occasions. The one I remember best was at the Kamani Auditorium, where he played before the interval and M. S. Subbulakshmi sang afterwards, a true 'dream team', indeed, of two great musicians who were also great human beings—one man, one woman, one Hindu, the other Muslim, one North Indian, the other South Indian, and both born in the same year, 1916.

Twenty-five years after I first heard Bismillah, I was able to repay—in small measure—a debt that had by then accumulated beyond all repayment. A friend who was a high official asked me to write a piece for the press urging that M. S. Subbulakshmi and Lata Mangeshkar be awarded the Bharat Ratna. I accepted the commission, since I likewise believed that it was past time that India's highest honour was rescued from the politicians, and returned to the artists and scholars for whom it was originally intended. However, when I wrote the article I strayed somewhat from my friend's script, and added the names of Ravi Shankar and Bismillah Khan to the ones he had given me. All four, I am happy to say, were awarded the Bharat Ratna in due course.

Like so many other readers of this column, my life has been lived to the music of Bismillah Khan. We all have our memories of where and when we first heard him play. And we all have our own favourite compositions. The Bismillah melodies that I especially love are his Durga, naturally, but also his Shankara and his Kedar, and his Chaiti and his Pahadi dhun.

On Bismillah's death the Government of his home state, Uttar Pradesh, announced that it would set up an Academy to honour its memory. As it happened, a better and more enduring memorial to Bismillah had already been set in motion. I refer, of course, to the magnificent response of the citizens of Banaras to the bomb blasts that rocked their city earlier this year. Intended to set Hindu against Muslim, the blasts instead reinforced the ties that bind the two communities in this irreducibly composite city. In affirming their trans-religious solidarity, the residents of Banaras took heart from the example of their greatest fellow townsman, who had himself refused to celebrate his birthday in protest against the terrorists. For the spirit of Bismillah is the spirit of Banaras, and, the rest of us willing, the spirit of India too. Published in *The Hindu*, 27/8/2006

## **GALBRAITH THE GREEN**

John Kenneth Galbraith, who died recently, was an economist of capacious interests and controversial views. His many works of scholarship were widely read, acclaimed by some and dismissed by others. I am not an economist, and thus not in a position to judge the merits of Galbraith's writings on the modern corporation or the free market. What I wish to do instead is to focus on Galbraith's forgotten contribution to the environmental debate.

This took the shape of a single essay, published in 1958, the same year that appeared the economist's *The Affluent Society*, a book that wryly anatomized the social consequences of the mass consumption age. In his book, Galbraith highlighted the 'preoccupation with productivity and production' in postwar America and Western Europe. The population in these societies had for the most part been adequately housed, clothed, and fed; now they expressed a desire for 'more elegant cars, more exotic food, more erotic clothing, more elaborate entertainment'.

The essay I speak of was written months after the book which made Galbraith's name and reputation. 'How Much Should a Country Consume?' is its provocative title, and it can be read as a reflective footnote to *The Affluent Society*. In the book itself, Galbraith had noted the disjunction between 'private affluence and public squalor', of how the single-minded pursuit of wealth had diverted attention and resources from the nurturing of true democracy, which he defined as the provision of public infrastructure, the creation of decent schools, parks, and hospitals. Now the economist turned his attention to the long-term consequences of this collective promotion of consumption, of the 'gargantuan and growing appetite' for resources in contemporary America. The American conservation movement, he remarked, had certainly noted the massive exploitation of resources and materials in the postwar period. However, its response was to look for more efficient methods of extraction, or the substitution of one material for another through technological innovation.

There was, wrote Galbraith, a noticeable 'selectivity in the conservationist's approach to materials consumption.' For 'if we are concerned about our great appetite for materials, it is plausible to seek to increase the supply, or decrease waste, to make better use of the stocks that are available, and to develop substitutes. But what of the appetite itself? Surely this is the ultimate source of the problem. If it continues its geometric course, will it not one day have to be restrained? Yet in the literature of the resource problem this is the forbidden question. Over it hangs a nearly total silence. It is as though, in the discussion of the chance for avoiding automobile accidents, we agree not to make any mention of speed!'

Galbraith identified two major reasons for the silence with regard to consumption. One was ideological, the worship of the Great God Growth. The principle of growth was a cardinal belief of the American people; this necessarily implied a continuous increase in the production of consumer goods. The second reason was political, the widespread scepticism of the state. For the



America of the 1950s had witnessed the ‘resurgence of a notably over-simplified view of economic life which [ascribed] a magical automatism to the price system...’. Now Galbraith was himself an unreconstructed New Dealer, who would tackle the problem of over-consumption as he would tackle the problem of under-employment, that is, through purposive state intervention. At the time he wrote, however, free-market economics ruled, and ‘since consumption could not be discussed without raising the question of an increased role for the state, it was not discussed’.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the appetites of consumers in the Western world (and of the United States in particular) placed a serious stress on the global environment. The pillage of forests, the strip-mining of land, the pollution of water and air, and the disturbances in world climate—these all were the consequence of the environmentally insensitive growth policies followed by the developed world.

In the present century, the threats to the global environment will be posed mainly by the developing world, in particular by the economic aspirations of those emerging giants, India and China. It is thus that the question posed by Galbraith, ‘How Much Should a Country Consume?’, may yet turn out to be the fundamental question of the 21st century. For the jury is out on whether the earth can sustain the globalization of the American way of life. There are real concerns that the competitive greed of the industrialized nations (India and China included) shall lead to ecological devastation and to costly wars between nations, these fought for control over natural resources.

Galbraith’s essay of 1958 is so obscure that it might even have been forgotten by its prolific author. And it appears to have escaped the attention of his hardworking biographer, Richard Parker, whose massive 700 page tome, *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics*, shows no awareness of this particular work of his subject. Yet it was strikingly prescient, as this final quote from the essay reveals: ‘It remains a canon of modern diplomacy that any preoccupation with oil should be concealed by calling on our still ample reserves of sanctimony’.

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### **A DRIVE INTO THE PAST**

Delhi is a city deeply layered in time, with the juxtaposition of the centuries manifest in styles of architecture, in the names of roads and buildings, in the dress of the city’s inhabitants and—not least—in the languages they speak and read. I am told that Delhi has as many as twelve daily newspapers printed in English, and that this is a world record. Of greater significance is another and perhaps less noticed Delhi record—that it is the only city in the world whose street names are printed in as many as four different scripts. Three of these scripts—Urdu, English, and Devanagari—represent the successive political regimes who have ruled India from Delhi. The

fourth, Gurmukhi, stands for the Sikhs who have never, yet, ‘ruled’ from here, but who have long been a strong presence in the city’s social and economic life.

In the 1970s I studied in Delhi; then, in the 1990s, I worked in Delhi. Over the last decade, while based in Bangalore, I have visited the capital often, sometimes staying there for weeks at a stretch. The Delhi I know—and love—lies south and east of the shopping centre known to all except paid-up Congressmen as Connaught Circus (they refer to it, more-or-less reverentially, as Indira Chowk). These are the areas I have driven and (as often) walked through, where I know, sometimes intimately, the roads and by-lanes, the buildings medieval, colonial, and post-modern.

My work in Delhi is usually in the centre of the city. On my most recent trip, however, I had to proceed from the airport directly to a meeting at the University of Delhi. On past occasions I had taken the Ring Road to the University, skirting the old walled city from the east and then cutting in past the Inter-State Bus Terminal and over the ridge into the campus. If one is starting from Palam, however, there is a shorter (and quicker) route, about which I managed to instruct the taxi-driver in time.

From the airport we drove with the traffic to Dhaula Kuan, before taking a detour to the left to catch the Upper Ridge Road. This was as I had remembered it, a well tarred surface surrounded by trees on both sides, the greenery interrupted only by a sign announcing the Park established in 1956 to commemorate the 2500th anniversary of Gautama Buddha. After four miles of solitude we drove down a steep slope to enter the densely packed locality of Karol Bagh. Nature had now ended, and History and Culture begun.

Karol Bagh used to be a place populated mostly by Tamils and Punjabi refugees. But the street we drove through was called, curiously enough, ‘Faiz Road’. I wondered whom it was named for. I hope that it honoured the memory of the poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. That would be fitting—for among the most eloquent of Faiz’s poems are those that lament the costs of Partition.

As we drove northwards, the roads grew narrower and the homes older. None were more than two storeys high, and some had lattice work, once lovely but now decayed, on their balconies and window sills. The shops and homes were interspersed with shrines—temples, mosques, gurdwaras. The tallest building we passed however served a solidly secular function. This was called ‘Filmistan’; here, many years ago, I had watched an odd film or two myself. It stood on a road named after a nationalist figure far older than Faiz, and a woman of action rather than a man of words. She was the Rani of Jhansi.

The roads that now honour rebel poet and rebel princess must have been so named soon after Independence. As I drove further northwards appeared signs of a commemoration other than, indeed opposed to, the nationalist. For to get to the University we had once more to meet and ascend the Ridge. And as we climbed up the hill from Shakti Nagar we passed the elongated reddish brown structure known as the ‘Nicholson Monument’, built to remember those who had died fighting in the battle of 1857, emphatically on the other side as the Rani of Jhansi.

Bang in the middle of my educative and even thrilling drive I had been brought face-to-face with the reality of the present. For roughly half-way down Rani of Jhansi Road lay a fairly large and freshly cleared space, its designated future proclaimed on a board outside it. The most prominent name on display was that of the architect, a Bombay man both celebrated and controversial, about whom it has been said that he has an ‘edifice complex’.

It is as well that I drove down that road when I did. Twenty years from now it might be unrecognizable, with the layers of history and cultural diversity flattened down—or rather, up—in a homogeneous row of thirty storey monoliths built in glass and concrete.

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### **THE END OF THE BIOGRAPHER?**

Many years ago, while doing research on the life of the anthropologist Verrier Elwin, I found myself in the library of the great old publishing house of John Murray, on Albemarle Street in central London. Elwin had once been a Murray author; and so had been some far more distinguished people. One such was the poet Lord Byron. Indeed, I sat working in the very room where had occurred one of the most notorious acts of literary vandalism, the burning of Byron’s papers.

When Byron died in 1818, his memoirs were with John Murray, awaiting publication. However, his colleagues now prevailed upon the publisher to abandon the project. The ‘memoirs were fit only for a brothel and damn Lord Byron to certain infamy if published’, said one friend. Another friend urged John Murray to ‘destroy whatever writing of his [that] might be discreditable to his fame’. Eventually, a bonfire was made of Byron’s memoirs and of hundreds of his letters.

A century later, the papers of another great writer were set ablaze. This time the arsonist was the author himself. This was the novelist Henry James who, in the evening of his life, asked his friends and family to return the letters he had written them. Once they had all come back to him, he burnt them in his own garden.

James’s intention was similar to that of Byron’s friends—to forestall a future biographer from excavating the secrets of his life. But, as one could have predicted, the effort was in vain. There were plenty of letters that had escaped his attention, so many in fact that his eventual, and magisterial, biographer, Leon Edel, wrote a five volume biography that tracked James’s life day-by-day and week-by-week, if not quite hour-by-hour. Adding insult to injury, Edel then proceeded to edit a five volume collection of James’s letters in the original.

As for John Murray, later generations of the publisher’s family came to regret and atone for that original act of destruction. They made assiduous attempts to collect letters to, by and about Byron, eventually depositing some 10, 000 of these in the National Library of Scotland where

they can be consulted by those who wish to write about Byron's fame and, if they so wish, his infamy.

Letters are to a biographer what water is to a fish (or spin bowlers to Mahendra Singh Dhoni). Without them he could not live. With them he lives luxuriantly. My own biography of Elwin was only made possible by letters that he had written to others, and which had since been preserved. Elwin came out to India in 1927; and lived here until his death in 1967. In those years he wrote to his mother in England twice a week; and to his sister Eldyth once a week. In the 1980s, Eldyth Elwin lived in a nursing home outside Oxford, where she was visited by Dr Richard Bingle, a archivist of legendary ability (and charm) who worked with the India Office Library and Records in London. Dr Bingle asked whether she had any materials of her brother's. The old lady signalled to her nurse, who pulled out a black box from under the bed. Inside were thousands of handwritten letters from her brother. It took Dr Bingle's legendary charm to persuade her to part with them. Now they constitute the core of the 'Verrier Elwin Collection' at the British Library.

I have often wondered—what will happen to the art of biography in this age of email? In the old days, letters were written because there was something to say, and because there was little else to do. In the image-saturated world we now live in, time off from work is so easily spent in a movie theatre, surfing the Net, or watching television. Few people write letters any more. And those that do get written are the terse, uncommunicative mails that seem so depressingly typical of this 'age of communication'. And even with regard to these emails—what happens to them, finally? Are they ever collected and filed? Where will one look for them in the future?

In retrospect, one might come to look upon the 19th and 20th centuries as the golden age of biography. In these centuries, serious attempts were made to classify and preserve records in archives properly protected from the dust and the monsoon. In these centuries, people of historical importance—politicians, generals, writers et. al.—wrote letters long in length and rich in emotion. Things now are all too different. The great figures of the 21st century will pose special and possibly insurmountable problems for those who choose to write their lives. As one whose own subjects lived in the past, I can have only pity and compassion for the biographers of the future.

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## **NEHRU AND NIRALA**

Many years ago, the anthropologist Triloki Nath Pandey told me a story featuring Jawaharlal Nehru and the poet Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala'. The Prime Minister had just returned from a visit to the People's Republic of China. He was addressing a public meeting in his home town, Allahabad, where Nirala then lived and where Triloki Pandey then studied. The poet sat in the front row, bare-bodied, his chest rubbed up with oil—for he, a passionate wrestler, had come

straight from a session at the akhara. He cut a striking figure, the shining torso contrasting with the white beard and shock of white hair.

Nehru accepted a garland or two from his admirers, before launching into his speech. 'I have come from China', he began, 'and heard there a story of a great king who had two sons. One was wise, the other stupid. When the boys reached adulthood, the king told the stupid one that he could have his throne, for he was fit only to be a ruler. But the wise one, he said, was destined for far greater things—he would be a poet'. With these words, Nehru took the garland off his head and flung it as an offering at Nirala's feet.

This is a wonderful story, which sounds better (and rings truer) in the original Hindi. Recently, I came across some documentary proof that Nehru did, indeed, have both affection and admiration for Nirala. This is tucked away in an appendix to *Five Decades*, D. S. Rao's history of the Sahitya Akademi. The Akademi was formally inaugurated on the 12th of March 1954, at a function held in the Central Hall of Parliament. The next day, the Prime Minister wrote a letter about Nirala to the Akademi's newly appointed Secretary, Krishna Kripalani. Nirala, said Nehru, had 'done good work in the past and even now sometimes writes well in his lucid moments.' His books were still popular, and widely read and used as textbooks. But, 'in his folly or extremity', Nirala had 'sold all those books for a song to various publishers getting just 25 or 30 or 50 rupees. The whole copyright was supposed to be sold'. Thus 'publishers have made large sums of money and continue to make it', while Nirala 'gets nothing from it and practically starves'.

This, commented Nehru, was 'a scandalous case of a publisher exploiting a writer shamelessly'. He urged the Akademi to work on an amendment of the copyright law so that Indian writers would be better protected in future. Then he continued: 'Meanwhile, Nirala deserves some financial help. It is no good giving the help to him directly because he gives it away to others immediately. In fact, he gives away his clothes, his last shirt and everything'. At the moment, it was his fellow poet Mahadevi Varma 'and some others in Allahabad of a Literary Association' who 'try to look after [Nirala] and give him some money too'. The Prime Minister suggested that the Akademi sanction a monthly allowance of a hundred rupees to help Nirala, and that this money be given to Mahadevi Varma to use on his behalf.

On the 16th of March the Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi wrote back to the Prime Minister. He had spoken to his Minister, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who 'has agreed that a sum of Rs. 100/ a month should be sanctioned for [Nirala] and paid to Srimati Mahadevi Varma'. This was lightning speed so far as government decision-making went—three days from conception to execution.

That a Prime Minister would find time to write a letter suggesting a stipend for an indigent poet—and direct also how best this stipend could be administered—this is the kind of thing nearly inconceivable in the India we now live in. But it was, I think, of a piece of the India of Nehru and Azad. Nor was such a tendency then restricted to the ruling Congress party. For D. S.

Rao's book also quotes some very learned letters on the functioning of the Akademi in its early years, written by the Communist M. P. Hiren Mukherjee and the then out-of-work statesman C. Rajagopalachari.

Among Nirala's contemporary admirers are Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Vikram Seth, English poets with a developed understanding of Hindi literature. We get some sense of how great a poet he was in David Rubin's Selected Poems of Nirala, though, as always, some of the greatness is lost in translation. Rubin says that in terms of genre and theme, 'the range of Nirala's poetry is far greater than that of any other twentieth-century Hindi poet'. His own selection contains poems on nature, politics, poverty, myth, language and love. These lines, from a poem titled (in English) 'Wild Jasmine', may serve as a ironic if unintended commentary on the subject of this column:

'Then I began to muse some more along that line:

If I had been some prince's son

I wouldn't suffer these disgraces.

Just think how many scholars would be my hangers-on,

heads bowed and hands stretched out for my largesse.

I'd give a little—and take much more.

And all the papers—unanimously!—would chant my praises.'

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## **THE FIRST 'GANDHIAN' INTELLECTUALS**

While Mahatma Gandhi was alive, not many intellectuals would willingly identify themselves as 'Gandhian'. Writers and thinkers treated him, at best, with a kindly indulgence; and, at worst, with unremitting hostility. The first group admired the Mahatma's asceticism and personal integrity and, were they Indian, his ability to move the masses and draw them into the anti-colonial struggle. However, they were not inclined to take his ideas seriously, viewing them as impractical and idealist. The second group dismissed him as a mystical humbug, an obscurantist who worked malevolently to draw the masses away from revolutionary action into the safe channels of bourgeois reformism. From this perspective, it was hard to credit Gandhi as having any 'ideas' at all; or, if one did, to attach to them those damning prefixes, 'reactionary' and 'medieval'.

Scholars and scientists who lived in the time of the Mahatma were happy to call themselves 'liberal' or 'socialist' or 'conservative' or 'Marxist'. So far as I can tell, there were only two intellectuals who would go so far as to call themselves 'Gandhian'. One was the economist J. C. Kumarappa. Kumarappa studied in London and New York, and gave up a flourishing career as an accountant to join Gandhi and the national movement. He worked for many years on rehabilitating the agrarian economy on ecological lines. His own legacy, so long forgotten, is now itself undergoing a rehabilitation. The American Gandhian Mark Lindley is about to publish a study of Kumarappa's economics; and two younger Indians of my acquaintance have embarked on a full-fledged biography of the man.

The other intellectual contemporary of the Mahatma who was not shy of the label 'Gandhian' was the anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose. Born in 1901 (nine years after Kumarappa) Bose studied and taught at Calcutta University, his academic career interspersed with spells of service in the nationalist cause. He was arrested in 1931 during the Salt Satyagraha; and spent a year in prison. He was again arrested during the Quit India movement of 1942; this time he spent three-and-a-half years in jail. His last spell of nationalist service was in 1946-7, when he served as Gandhi's secretary and interpreter as the Mahatma went on a walking tour through the riot-torn villages of eastern Bengal.

In 1934, N. K. Bose published *Selections from Gandhi*, one of the first, and still one of the best, anthologies of the Mahatma's thought. The book covered an astonishingly wide range of themes: from Gandhi's ideas on religion and morality to his writings on the Congress and on self-government more generally. It was an effort both comprehensive and precocious; notably, it had separate sections on 'Women's Problems' and on education.

*Selections* was the first of three major books by Bose on Gandhi. In 1940 he brought out his *Studies in Gandhism*, whose analytical chapters focused on the theory and practice of non-violence. Thirteen years later, he published *My Days with Gandhi*, a moving memoir of the days spent in the field in Noakhali, the book combining a deep appreciation of Gandhi's work in dousing the flames of communal passion with a skeptical attitude towards his experiments with brahmacharya.

Bose's contributions to anthropological literature were scarcely less significant. He wrote profusely in English as well as Bangla, on themes as varied as the temple architecture of Orissa, the structure of Hindu society, and the condition of adivasis. He was a gifted lecturer too; forty years after he had heard Bose speak on Gandhi to his class at Lucknow University, the anthropologist T. N. Madan recalled his talk to me, topic by topic if not quite word for word. As his biographer Surajit Sinha has written, he played a formative role in the 'building [of] an Indian Tradition in Anthropology'. For many years he edited the journal *Man in India*. Bose also served a three-year term as Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The reports he wrote then still repay reading, as models of empathetic and socially engaged anthropology.

Like his master Gandhi, Bose was a man of considerable character and steely will. A friend once told me of a seminar he had attended when Bose was in the advanced stages of cancer. Here, a young man from a rural background accused anthropologists of being voyeurs; their research into rural India, he claimed, was never of benefit to the villagers themselves. Bose urged him to take a more holistic perspective; the results of science and scholarship, he pointed out, accumulate slowly, and help humanity only in the long-term. Suppose a medical researcher wanted to study Bose's own condition, and suppose he made it clear that the knowledge thus gained would help cure cancer only well after this particular patient had fallen victim to the disease. Should Bose refuse to be examined on the grounds that the research would be of no immediate benefit to him? Or should he instead encourage a growth in knowledge that might actually be of help to other humans in the future? The parable was profoundly Gandhian, as indeed was its unspoken lesson—that the cancer sufferer must submit himself to the experiment even if he did not stand to gain from it himself.

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### **AN ADIVASI CHAMPION**

In the first week of February 2002, I got a call from the writer Mahasweta Devi. I had met Mahasweta only once—in a boarding house in Delhi where we both happened to be staying—but knew, of course, a great deal about her. I had not read her novels—I don't read much fiction—but had been profoundly moved by her field reports on the condition of that most disadvantaged section of Indian society, the adivasis. I had read these reports in the 1980s, as they appeared in those remarkable little journals, *Frontier of Calcutta* and the *Economic and Political Weekly of Bombay*. (They have now been collected in book form in *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*.) These essays detailed, with great sensitivity but also with a sometimes barely suppressed anger, the exploitation of adivasi labour, the stealing of their land, the plundering of their forests.

Mahasweta's reports were mostly from the tribal districts of the Chotonagpur Plateau. At the time, the region was witnessing the renewal, albeit in more militant forms, of the old tribal demand for a separate state of Jharkhand. By official figures, some Rs 3000 crores had been spent by the Government on 'tribal development' in Chotanagpur. Where this money had gone it was hard to say, for the people still lived in 'a primeval darkness'; without schools, hospitals, roads or electricity, with their lands seized by outsiders and their forests closed to them by the state. And the oppression was not merely economic; Hindu and Christian missionaries pressed the tribals to change their faith, and give up their own traditions of art, dance, and music. 'The Jharkhand demand is set against such a background', reported Mahasweta: 'Tales of woe and exploitation on the one hand; the pulse of resistance on the other'.



However, when Mahasweta rang me from Calcutta in February 2002, it was not about the oppression of tribals, but with regard to the persecution of another vulnerable minority in democratic India, the Muslims. The riots in Gujarat were into their second week. Disturbing reports were coming in of state complicity, of mobs being aided by officials in identifying Muslim homes and shops, of the police idly looking on. Mahasweta had written a strong letter to the President of India, appealing to him ‘to immediately intervene as the constitutional head of the country to protect the lives of innocent citizens and prevent the carnage from spreading any further’. She wanted me to ask U. R. Anantha Murty to write likewise to the President. Anantha Murty wrote an equally forceful letter—and, as we now know, the President wrote himself to the Prime Minister of the day, but to little avail.

Two years later I met Mahasweta for the second time—in, as it happens, Gujarat. She had come to inaugurate an Academy of Tribal Learning, whose moving spirit is the scholar and activist Ganesh (G. N.) Devy. Devy was once a professor of literature, an esteemed and distinguished one. But, inspired by Mahasweta, he gave up his career to work among the adivasis of western India. His group, Bhasha, has done outstanding work among tribes stigmatized by society and persecuted by the police. They have also published many volumes of tribal folklore and literature—as its name suggests, among Bhasha’s aims is to protect tribal languages from being swallowed up by the wider world.

The new Academy of Tribal Learning seeks to impart humanistic education to adivasi boys and girls. It is located in Tejgarh, in the Bhil country. We drove there from Vadodara, through land looking unnaturally green. The rains had been heavy that year—excessively heavy, in fact. When we reached Tejgarh we found that the bridge that linked the Academy campus to the roadhead had been washed away. We had thus to walk through slush and mud, which was unpleasant for us all, but more so for the chief guest. For Mahasweta was a full twenty years older than the company, and seriously diabetic, too.

We reached the Academy, admired its elegantly understated brick buildings, and had our meeting. Later, Devy asked us to accompany him on a tour of the campus. Mahasweta insisted on coming. The paths were wet—or non-existent. Here and there they had been colonized by thorny bushes. And it was raining. Every now and then, Mahasweta was asked whether she had had enough. The enquiry was made out of sympathy, for at her age and in her physical condition the struggle seemed too much to bear. Someone then said, with impatience rather than in jest, that they didn’t want to be held responsible if she collapsed. Mahasweta answered that would indeed be a perfect death—for where else would she want to be cremated than in an Academy of Tribal Learning?

Watching Mahasweta that day, I was reminded of that she had told me over the phone that morning in February 2002: ‘hum maidan nahin choddenge, hum maidan nahin choddenge’. She is, in a word, indomitable. On 14th January this year she turned eighty years of age. Happy

birthday, Mahasweta. May you stay on the field a good while yet. Published in The Hindu, 29/1/2006

## MAHADEV

A book I cherish greatly, and which I bought in the great Sunday book bazaar in Delhi's Daryaganj—since closed by a philistine police force—is a 75th birthday tribute to Mahatma Gandhi. Four hundred pages long, beautifully bound and printed (at the Karnatak Printing Press, Bombay—also probably by now a victim of history), it assembles essays by truly diverse hands, such as Nehru, Kripalani, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Nandalal Bose among the Indians, and Einstein and Pearl Buck among the foreigners. Of the forty contributions all but two are about the Mahatma. The first is a remembrance of the recently deceased Kasturba, reproduced from Gandhi's autobiography. The second is an essay on Mahadev Desai by the anthropologist and writer Verrier Elwin.

Elwin's essay is an encrusted little gem. It begins by stating what his subject meant to him, but moves quickly on to what he meant to the Mahatma. Mahadev Desai was officially Gandhi's secretary, but actually 'he was much more than that. He was in fact Home and Foreign Secretary combined. He managed everything. He made all the arrangements. He was equally at home in the office, the guest-house and the kitchen. He looked after many guests and must have saved ten years of Gandhi's life by diverting from him unwanted visitors'.

If this was not enough, Mahadev was also 'Gandhi's Boswell', the recorder of his words, the scribe who presented his Master's Voice to all India, and beyond. Thus 'Mahadev's task was to make Gandhi real to millions. He made him perhaps the best known man in the world, certainly the best loved. The punctual, vivid, intimate stories that appeared week by week in Young India and Harijan displayed to readers all over the world a personality so lovable that love was inevitably aroused in response'.

In Mahadev's portrait of Gandhi, writes Elwin, 'the politician was somewhat in abeyance. That was natural for Gandhi as a politician is fully represented by his own speeches and statements. It was Mahadev's special privilege to be able to show the world the Mahatma off the stage and below the platform.' And where Mahadev excelled was 'in showing us Gandhi the debater....He was never more pleased than when he could show his Bapu confounding an opponent in argument, putting him down, chuckling him out of countenance. I used to suspect that sometimes he deliberately introduced people into Gandhi's presence for the express purpose of sharpening his wit and enabling him to display his truly marvellous powers of debate'.

The journalist Mahendra Desai, who edited Mahadev's diaries, and whose father Valji Desai was also a close associate of the Mahatma's, once told me that it was Elwin's essay that inspired the full-length biography of Mahadev written by his son Narayan. From this book—written

originally in Gujarati and published in English translation under the title *The Fire and the Rose*—we learn that Mahadev Haribhai Desai was born on the first day of 1892 in a village in the Surat district. He displayed, early on, a love of literature both Gujarati and English. At fourteen, he passed the matriculation examination of the Bombay University. He then moved to Bombay, where he took a first class in his B. A., majoring in Philosophy and Logic. The next step—very logical for an Indian of his social and educational background—was to take a law degree.

Mahadev qualified as a lawyer in 1915, the year Gandhi himself returned to India. It was through the younger man's love of literature that they met. Mahadev had translated the liberal thinker John Morley's book *On Compromise* into Gujarati, and went to Gandhi to seek his advice on how best to get it published. Over the next two years they met off and on, each becoming progressively more impressed with the other. Finally, in November 1917, Desai decided to join Gandhi full-time. For the next twenty-five years he lived with him and for him. As the historian Rajmohan Gandhi observes, 'Waking up before Gandhi in pre-dawn darkness, and going to sleep long after his Master, Desai lived Gandhi's day thrice over—first in an attempt to anticipate it, next in spending it alongside Gandhi, and finally in recording it into his diary'.

Twenty-two years younger than Gandhi, Mahadev yet died five-and-a-half years before him. Narayan Desai's book begins with a moving account of Mahadev's passing, in the Aga Khan palace where Gandhi and he had been confined when the Quit India movement began. He spent his last hours on earth with his head on Gandhi's lap. When he finally stopped breathing, Gandhi called out in agitation: 'Mahadev! Mahadev!'. Later, when asked why he did so, the Mahatma answered: 'I felt that if Mahadev opened his eyes and looked at me, I would tell him to get up. He had never disobeyed me in his life. I was confident that had he heard those words, he would have defied even death and got up'.

Mahadev had served his Master for most of his life, but the last act of service was to be Gandhi's. He bathed the body himself, albeit 'with shaking hands'. Then he chose to wrap Mahadev in the coarse sheets available in the jail—as befitting the death of a prisoner'. Then he lit the fire, such that—in Narayan Desai's words—'he who had been the father all his life now performed the duties of a son'.

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## **KASTURBA**

The wives of the leading Indian nationalists lie shrouded in obscurity. Tagore, Nehru, Patel, Rajagopalachari, Bose, Ambedkar—in the meticulous documentation of their careers, their spouses figure scarcely at all. One reason is that in most cases the wives died early; another, that even while they lived the wives were expected to stay out of sight.

The great exception, of course, is Kasturba, wife of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Born in 1869, the same year as the Mahatma, she lived till 1944. She bore him four children, ran his various homes, and went several times to jail for his cause. That she lived so long, and played her part in public campaigns, are two reasons why she is part of the nationalist consciousness. A third reason is that the man she married was the greatest of modern Indians. A fourth is that he wrote about her, and at some length, too.

In Gandhi's autobiography, he speaks with characteristic frankness about their relationship—about how he imposed upon Kasturba his radical ideas about celibacy, the simple life, and the removal of untouchability. 'I was a cruelly kind husband', writes Gandhi: 'I regarded myself as her teacher, and so harassed her out of my blind love for her'. He reproduces, with a honesty only he could summon, their conversation when he decided to give away ornaments gifted to them. Kasturba reminds him that he had once forced her to surrender the jewels her parents had given her. Now, he sought 'to make sadhus of my boys', deny their wives any jewellery, and take away a necklace gifted her by admirers. 'Is the necklace given you for your service or for my service?', asks Gandhi, sharply. Kasturba's answer deserves to be enshrined—the metaphor is inescapable—in letters of gold: 'I agree. But service rendered by you is as good as rendered by me. I have toiled and moiled for you day and night. Is that no service? You forced all and sundry on me, making me weep bitter tears, and I slaved for them!'

The words must have even more eloquent in the original Gujarati. Gandhi comments that 'these were pointed thrusts, and some of them went home. But I was determined to return the ornaments. I somehow succeeded in extorting a consent from her. The gifts received... were all returned'.

It is fair to say that those Indians who know of Kasturba know her through her husband's recollections, directly, or as amplified on the screen. However, the narrative of Gandhi's autobiography ends with the Khilafat-Non-Co-operation movement of 1919-21. In the decades to follow Kasturba continued to live a very interesting life indeed. She was jailed during the Salt Satyagraha, and again during the Quit India movement. She lived and worked alongside her husband, and continued to argue with him.

Some glimpses of this later phase of Kasturba's life are contained in a charming memoir by Sushila Nayar, now long out of print. Nayar writes here of Kasturba's stature in the national movement, of how 'she had become the Ba (mother) to India's millions'. She writes also of her bonds to her sons and their children, and of her own child-like love of the game of Carrom (which Kasturba played daily while incarcerated in Poona, always expecting to win). There is a wonderfully moving account of her last illness, and her wish to have, close to her, their long estranged son Harilal. He had rebelled early against the father, but stayed devoted to the mother—and she to him. Nayar does not however tell the story of how, when Gandhi's train once stopped at Katni station, they heard a cry: 'Mata Kasturba ki jai'. This was most unusual, for the cheers usually were for the more celebrated husband. It turned out to be Harilal, 'looking

very poorly in health, with all his teeth gone and his clothes in rags'. He walked up and handed over an orange to Kasturba. When Gandhi asked what he had brought for him, Harilal answered: 'Nothing. If you are so great, it is because of Ba'.

After Kasturba's death in 1944, a trust was formed in her memory. Now in its sixtieth year, the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust is headquartered at Indore, and has branches in as many as 22 states. It runs schools for women and children, as well as craft centres. Also under its purview is a well-equipped women's hospital in Sewagram, where I once met Sushila Nayar, still serving, in what turned out to be the last year of her life. Other outstanding social workers associated with the Trust have included Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Ashoka Gupta, and Radha Bhatt. I have heard it said that the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust is perhaps the most genuinely Gandhian of all the Gandhian institutions still around.

Having read thus far, readers of this column will know what is coming—surely it is past time that we have a proper historical biography of Kasturba? There is a book in the market which presumes to be one, but it is far too sentimental and poorly sourced to really qualify. But for the prospective biographer there is material aplenty—memoirs by Gandhi, Sushila Nayar and others, government records and newspaper archives, and letters by her sons. I think I know just the person—I will try persuading her at once.

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### **'A BEASTLY PEOPLE...'**

In April 1919, a group of soldiers led by a man named Dyer fired at a crowd of unarmed Indians at the Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar. Speaking in the House of Commons, Winston Churchill described this as 'a monstrous event', a 'great slaughter or massacre upon a particular crowd of people, with the intention of terrorising not merely the rest of the crowd, but the whole district or country'.

Churchill was then the Secretary of State for War, and this was most likely his first public utterance on Indian affairs. His last such utterances date to the mid 1950s, when he and Jawaharlal Nehru were both Prime Ministers of independent nations. Now, Churchill expressed much admiration for Nehru as a man who had 'conquered two great human infirmities': fear and hate. In one fanciful moment, he even saw his fellow Harrovian as the 'Light of Asia', who was shaping the destiny of hundreds of millions of Indians and playing an 'outstanding part in world affairs'.

Churchill's first and last statements about India were notably sympathetic to nationalist sentiments. But his record in-between was truly dreadful. Indeed, a whole book might be written about Churchill's tirades against this country and its peoples. These came in two phases. The first phase ran between 1929 and 1932, when the Gandhian movement had made the discussion of Indian self-government central to British politics. In October 1929, when the Viceroy (Lord Irwin) suggested Dominion Status for India, Churchill called the idea 'not only fantastic in itself but criminally mischievous in its effects'. As an ambitious politician currently out of power, Churchill thought it necessary to marshal 'the sober and resolute forces of the British Empire' against the granting of self-government to India.

Over the next two years, Churchill delivered dozens of speeches where he worked up, in most unsober form, the forces hostile to the winning of political independence by people with brown (or black) skins. As the historian Sarvepalli Gopal writes, in these speeches Churchill 'stressed not only the glory but also the necessity of empire'. The glory was to India, for in his view, without the Raj there would be little peace and less prosperity. And the necessity was to England, for if the Raj ended, then 'that spells the doom of Lancashire'. Churchill assiduously stoked fears of an economic recession if access to Indian markets and goods was denied. Appealing to the basest prejudices of his audience, he claimed that the ones who would really benefit from any sort of decolonization were rival European powers.

Speaking to an audience at the City of London in December 1930, Churchill claimed that if the British left the sub-continent, then 'an army of white janissaries, officered if necessary from Germany, will be hired to secure the armed ascendancy of the Hindu'. Speaking at the Albert Hall three months later, he claimed that 'to abandon India to the rule of the Brahmins [who in his view dominated the Congress party] would be an act of cruel and wicked negligence'. If the British left, 'India will fall back quite rapidly through the centuries into the barbarism and privations of the Middle Ages'.

Through the late thirties Churchill thought (and spoke) little about India. But then in 1940 he became Prime Minister, and had to confront the question as to what would happen to Indians after the Allies had won a war ostensibly fought to preserve freedom. As the diaries of his Secretary of State for India, Leo Amery, make clear, Churchill was implacably opposed to all proposals for Indian self-rule. In July 1940, Amery found Churchill 'terribly exalté on the subject of India and impossible to reason with'. When, in March 1941, Amery expressed his 'anxiety about the growing cleavage between Moslem and Hindu', Churchill 'at once said: "Oh, but that is all to the good"' (because it would help the British stay a while longer).

An entry of September 1942 in the Amery diaries reads: 'During my talk with Winston he burst out with: "I hate Indians. They are a beastly people with a beastly religion"'. A year later, when the question of grain being sent to the victims of the Bengal famine came up in a Cabinet meeting, Churchill intervened with a 'flourish on Indians breeding like rabbits and being paid a million a day by us for doing nothing by us about the war'.

On 4 August 1944, after four years of suffering these outbursts, Amery wrote that 'I am by no means sure whether on this subject of India he [Churchill] is really quite sane...'. To this let me append the comment of Lord Wavell, who as Viceroy of India between 1943 and 1945, likewise had much to do with Churchill. In his diary, Wavell concluded that the British Prime Minister 'has a curious complex about India and is always loth to hear good of it and apt to believe the worst'.

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### **THE MERITS OF MARTYRDOM**

This week forty-one years ago, I was hustled out of my school in the (then) little hill town of Dehradun to watch a helicopter land. In that age and place, vehicles that flew were rare in any case. This one was made more special by its principal passenger, who was Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India. And so with my classmates I was taken out of school to the Parade Ground that abutted it, there to wave vigorously at the chopper as it came down, and more vigorously still at the man who came out.

Years later, I read the Delhi papers published that week, and learnt why Nehru had come visiting. Seventeen years as Prime Minister had tired and worn him. In January 1964 he had a minor stroke; but after a few days he was back to work again. In April 1964 he released Sheikh Abdullah from prison, and began moving towards a final settlement on Kashmir. Abdullah stayed with Nehru for a week in early May, and on the 20th returned for another visit. On the 22nd, Nehru gave a press conference where he announced that the Sheikh was proceeding to Pakistan to talk with its President, Ayub Khan. A reporter on the spot wrote that 'Mr Nehru looked tired and weak as he addressed the news conference. He spoke somewhat haltingly and disposed of most topics with unusual brevity'.

On the 24th of May, Abdullah took a airplane to Rawalpindi, on a political mission of some importance. The same morning Nehru flew to Dehradun for a very brief holiday. The next day he went with his daughter to see the sulphur springs at Sahasradhara. In the evening a spying scribe came round to the Circuit House, to find Nehru feeling 'refreshed by the fragrant breeze and a large variety of flowers growing all around'.

Nehru spent forty-eight hours in the 'bracing climate of Dehra Dun'. But they were not enough; for a mere two days after he flew back to Delhi he died in his sleep. Ever since, Indians of all ages, classes, and cultural backgrounds have debated what he meant to this country. Nehru has been accused by some of being a socialist in name only, by others of being too much of a socialist in practice; by some of being too much of a secularist, of others of not being secularist enough; by some of being too enamoured of the West, by others of not being enamoured enough.

While he lived, Nehru was probably the most widely admired of Indians; after he died, he has become the most widely reviled. One reason for this is the natural cynicism of Indians, their penchant for cosying up to people in power and dumping on them after they have left office. Another is the decline of Congress hegemony, so that parties and groups which opposed Nehru's ideas have grown in influence. A third reason, on which I want to focus here, is the manner of Nehru's death.

Jawaharlal Nehru was in many respects a very lucky man. Born to a wealthy father, he was endowed with good looks and a considerable intelligence. His background and abilities enabled him to win the affections of the acknowledged leader of the freedom struggle. For Gandhi's patronage was crucial in his becoming free India's first Prime Minister.

Where luck deserted Nehru, however, was with regard to how and where he died. Contrast his fate here with that of three other nationalists: Bhagat Singh, Subhas Chandra Bose and Mahatma Gandhi himself. Bhagat Singh was executed by the British Raj. Bose died in an aircraft somewhere in South-east Asia. Gandhi was murdered by a Hindu fanatic.

These three Indians shared something else apart from an unnatural death. None of them exercised political office. Two died before India achieved independence, the third shortly afterwards. None served as Cabinet Minister or Prime Minister, there to make mistakes, real or imagined, which would damage them in the eyes of their countrymen, damage them while they lived or after they were gone.

Bhagat Singh, Bose and Gandhi were all great patriots. Yet there is little question that they have been helped, posthumously, by not ever being in power and by having met violent deaths. There is thus an innocence to their reputations, that the memories of their martyrdom only serves to enhance.

Nehru's daughter and grandson both served as Prime Minister. However, unlike him, Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi both fell to an assassin's bullet. Their records in office were distinctly inferior to that of their forbear; yet criticism of their politics is immediately modulated by the reminder that they 'gave their life for the country'. In truth, Nehru gave his life for his country too. Before 1947, he spent more than ten years in jail for his cause; after 1947, he held, with dignity and diligence, the most difficult job in the world. Nehru died in his own bed, but the death was brought on by work, or more accurately, over-work—that is, by the four decades of sustained commitment to the idea and people of India.

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## **PUNJAB PAST AND PRESENT**

I first visited Punjab in the summer of 1973, to play a cricket match in Patiala. Later that same year occurred an event of some significance in the history of Punjab and India. In October 1973 the Working Committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal met at the great gurdwara in Anandpur Sahib, and asked the Government of India to hand over Chandigarh to Punjab; to also hand over other Punjabi-speaking areas presently with other states; and to increase the proportion of Sikhs in the Army. It criticized the 'foreign policy of India framed by the Congress party' as 'worthless, hopeless and highly detrimental to the interests of the Country, the Nation and the Mankind at large'. Asking for a recasting of the Indian Constitution on 'real federal principles', it said that 'in this new Punjab and in other States the Centre's interference would be restricted to defence, foreign relations, currency, and general administration; all other departments would be in the jurisdiction of Punjab (and other states) which would be fully entitled to frame own laws on these subjects for administration'.

Some of these claims were new; but their substance went back several decades, to the division of India by religion in 1947. In this division the Sikhs had suffered most of all. They lost millions of lives, millions of acres of land they had made fertile in the 'Canal Colonies', and some very sacred shrines, left behind in what was now Pakistan. Through the 1950s, the intrepid Master Tara Singh led the Akalis in the struggle for a Punjabi Suba, a separate, Punjabi-speaking and Sikh-dominated state that could compensate for the traumas of Partition. The State was finally granted in 1966, but its extent was not what was hoped for; nor, indeed, were its powers. Thus the Anandpur Sahib resolution, which sought to make real the promise of states' autonomy merely hinted at by the Indian Constitution.

These demands, for a deeper and more genuine federalism, were unexceptionable. But at other places the Anandpur Sahib Resolution was amenable to more radical, and perhaps more dangerous, interpretations. The preamble spoke of the Akali Dal as 'the very embodiment of the hopes and aspirations of the Sikh Nation'. The 'political goal of the Panth' was defined as 'the pre-eminence of the Khalsa', with the 'fundamental policy' of the Akali Dal being the 'realization of this birth-right of the Khalsa through creation of congenial environment and a political set-up'.

1973 was not perhaps the best time to make these demands, with Mrs Indira Gandhi riding high on the wave of a war recently won, and the Centre more powerful than ever before. Its powers were increased still further with the Emergency, when the movers of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution were put in jail. But in 1977 the Emergency was lifted, elections called, and the Congress party comprehensively trounced. In this new political environment the claims of the Akalis were renewed, and indeed intensified. An Akali conference of October 1978 compared the thirty years of Congress rule to the bad old days of Mughal imperialism. But now that the Congress out of power, said the Akalis, it was time for a 'progressive decentralization of powers'. The demands of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution were revived, and new ones added;

such as a redistribution of river waters to favour Punjab, an international airport at Amritsar, and a broadcasting station at the Golden Temple itself.

Towards the end of 1978 the Akalis launched an agitation to fulfil the demands of the Anandpur Sahib Resolution. However, outside their fold there were radicals who thought that nothing less than true independence, as in a separate 'Sikh Nation', would satisfy the Panth. The call from Khalistan was issued from outside India by the likes of Ganga Singh Dhillon in Washington and Jagajit Singh Chauhan in London. But it also found some takers within Punjab, notably a hitherto obscure preacher named Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale. With his entry into the fray commenced some very troubled times indeed.

Troubles, of course, were not new to Punjab or the Punjabis. There were the religious wars of the eighteenth century; then the Anglo-Sikh wars of the nineteenth century. Early in the twentieth century the province was an epicentre of the anti-colonial struggle. Then came the 1940s, with Partition and the communal conflagration that accompanied it. Several decades of relative peace ensued, to be broken now by the decade of the 1980s, when much blood was spilt, some of it innocent, and all of it bad.

What was called the 'Punjab crisis' spawned much excellent reportage and several good books. Older readers will be familiar with it all, but for the benefit of those born after 1980, let me flag the most basic facts. What started as a political rivalry between the Congress and the Akalis soon degenerated into conflict between a section of the Hindus and a section of Sikhs. This led, on the one hand, to a series of communal killings; and, on the other, to a increasing alienation of Sikhs from the Government of India. Among the many low points of a dishonest decade, three in particular must be mentioned: the storming of the Golden Temple by the Indian Army in June 1984; the murder of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi by her bodyguards on the last day of October 1984; and the revenge killings of innocent Sikhs which followed.

The first and last of these events recruited many fresh recruits to the separatist cause. The latter part of the eighties, therefore, saw a reign of terror in the Punjab countryside: jointly imposed by the Khalistanis, who intimidated and sometimes killed those who did not fall in line; and by the police, who in their search for the insurgents cared little for legal procedure or for the rights of ordinary citizens.

For close on fifteen years, the news from Punjab was unredeemingly grim. It seemed that the war between state and citizen would never end; or, if it would, only after the creation of a separate Sikh Nation of Khalistan. But finally the violence dimmed and, in time, stopped. The Punjabi set aside his sectarian grievances, and sought instead to better his economic lot.

In the first week of March, I revisited Punjab after a gap of thirty-two years. Travelling through the state, and talking to a wide cross-section of people, it was hard to fathom that this was the same place from which one would get news only of killings, and more killings. Khalistan was forgotten; why, even the demand for Chandigarh to be transferred to Punjab was not being made

anymore. Identity was still important; but not so much a religious identity as a regional, cross-national one. In Patiala, I met an articulate Maharani who was seeking to build bridges with the Pakistani part of Punjab—by sending teams of cricket-playing children, and receiving some in return. In Amritsar, I met a radical intellectual who had helped host a series of talks by a progressive Punjabi novelist from Lahore. Meanwhile, a spate of fresh investments suggested that things were very stable indeed. There were signs everywhere of new schools, colleges, factories, even a spanking new ‘heritage village’ on the highway, that sought to recreate, in museumized form, the ‘traditional’ culture of the Punjabi.

There remains much that is wrong with the state of Punjab. The future of agriculture is threatened by a falling water-table. There is discrimination according to caste, and according to gender—female infanticide being particularly high. But these are problems that afflict the rest of the country too, to be resolved, here as well as there, by patient social reform and purposive government action. The crucial thing is that in political terms Punjab is at peace with itself and with India. That is more, much more, than one dared hope for in 1985 or 1995.

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### **DEFACING THE MAHATMA**

On 30th January 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was murdered by a right-wing fanatic named Nathuram Godse. The act shamed most Indians—but not all. For there has always been a significant minority who have been on the side of Godse. At different times, the Shiv Sena chief Balasaheb Thackeray and the then RSS chief Rajendra Singh have praised Gandhi’s murderer. The BJP cannot afford to openly praise Godse, but their political ideology is yet closely akin to his. Since the nineteen eighties, especially, battle has been joined between the secular ideals of Gandhi and the theocratic vision of his assassin. The perpetrators of the Gujarat violence of 2002 were certainly closer to Godse than to Gandhi. Indeed, those riots were feelingly described by the veteran Gandhian Amrutbhai Modi as ‘the second assassination of Gandhiji’.

There have been attacks on Gandhi from the radical right; and there have been attacks from the radical left. When the Gandhi Centenary was celebrated in 1969, statues of the Mahatma were defaced in Calcutta by the Naxalites, thus to show their contempt for his belief in non-violence. Many years later, the Andhra Naxalite leader Kondapalli Seetaramaiah found himself in the town of Porbandar, Gandhi’s birthplace. He was on the run from the police, but his fanatical beliefs were intact. As he later told an interviewer, he visited the home where Gandhi was born and, as he came out, spat at the floral decoration on the verandah outside, thus to signify his total rejection of the Father of the Nation.

When he was alive Gandhi was attacked by extremists of left and right; and so it has been after his death. These attacks we can understand, without however endorsing them. Far more difficult

to comprehend is the defacement of the Mahatma's memory by the institution mandated to protect, honour and further it—the Government of India. I refer here to the issuing by that Government of a set of hundred volumes purporting to be a 'new', 'improved', 'revised' edition of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. In fact, these volumes are a disgrace to scholarship; they dishonour the Mahatma as well as the Government that presumes to speak in his name.

It was in the nineteen fifties that the Government of India first decided to bring out, in a series of volumes, all that Gandhi had written or said by way of books, articles, speeches, letters and petitions. The respected Gandhian scholar Bharatan Kumarappa was chosen as Chief Editor. Sadly, he died after the first volume appeared. He was succeeded, briefly, by Jairamdas Daulatram, before he decided to take up a Governorship. The job then passed on to Professor K. Swaminathan who, in thirty years of devoted service, took the project from infancy to completion.

Swaminathan was both a meticulous scholar and a first-class institution-builder. He gathered around him a team of equally committed scholars, including C. N. Patel (who served as Deputy Chief Editor) and Bhawani Prasad Mishra (who was in charge of the Hindi edition). Patel and Mishra, in turn, built their own cadres of skilled and selfless editors. Over the next few decades, this team brought out ninety volumes of Gandhi's works, the entries printed chronologically, each entry checked for authenticity, and, where required, carefully annotated and cross-referenced. Each of these ninety volumes had a long preface written by the editor, setting the material in context. Later, seven supplementary volumes were added, to incorporate material that had come in too late for inclusion in the original series. Also printed were authoritative Subject and Person indexes to the series as a whole.

These ninety-nine volumes were a monument to editorial integrity and scholarship. The South African historian Uma Dhupelia-Meshtrie has called the series 'astounding'; a view that will be endorsed by scholars all over the world. The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, or CWMG as it was affectionately abbreviated, was something its initiators and executors could justly be proud of. There were few parallels anywhere; perhaps only the Weimar edition of the works of Goethe had the same authoritative status as the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. (The comparison with Goethe is apt, for he matches Gandhi in having written or reflected upon virtually every aspect of the human condition.)

The Collected Works preserved all that Gandhi had said for posterity; thus also giving a massive impetus to scholarship. The numerous recent studies of Gandhi, both biographical and thematic, would have been inconceivable without the CWMG. I should say the original CWMG, for in 2000 the Government decided to issue a new 'revised' set, guided by the following principle: that there would be a hundred volumes, each of 500 pages. The edifice painstakingly created by Swaminathan and his team was dismantled; and the entries now 'remixed' according to the new specifications. In the process, the illuminating prefaces written to the original volumes have been

dropped. Also missing are the maps and illustrations. The cross-references, so carefully prepared and so indispensable to scholars, have been rendered meaningless.

And there is worse to report. A study by the Ahmedabad scholar Tridip Suhrud reveals that as many as ninety-seven items have been dropped from a mere seven volumes of the original edition. The total number of excised entries may run to more than five hundred. The new Subject and Person indexes are unusable. There have even been attempts to modernize Gandhi's English; to replace then current words like 'shew' with contemporary equivalents.

Those fine scholars who laboured for years on the original edition are appalled. La. Su. Rengarajan calls the new series 'an utterly rudderless conglomeration'; it is, he says, a mauling of the memory of Gandhi. Lalitha Zachariah comments that 'the vast edifice of Gandhian thought has been undone in a shocking orgy of twisting, "treating", and truncating, all in the name of "revision"'. Swaminathan's edition had become the standard edition; cited by volume and page numbers in hundreds of books, theses, essays, and articles. Now, with that great work redone and undone, both scholars and readers have been put into confusion.

Speculation is rife as to why this new edition was commissioned. There could be a pecuniary motive at work; namely, kickbacks from the new contracts for typesetting and printing. Or the impulse could be ideological; the 'editing' done with a view to excising entries embarrassing to the beliefs of those then in power. Or it could be personal vanity; the desire to illegitimately insert one's own, otherwise unknown name, as the 'editor' of the works of Mahatma Gandhi.

Whatever the reasons, the 'revision' was without question an act of vandalism. That the Government now in power recognizes, although it is not sure about how to proceed. There is talk of a fresh revision of the revision; this to be done, we may be sure, by scholars far less able than those once collected by Professor Swaminathan. The best course for the Government is to be guided by the principles of Gandhi himself. For the Mahatma was great and gracious enough to acknowledge his mistakes; even, on one famous occasion, to having made a 'Himalayan Blunder'. A Government's collective ego may be larger than a saint's individual one, but we may still hope that it wants both to honour Gandhi's memory and save its own name. There is really only one way to go: namely, to call back all copies of the shameful 'revised' edition; to reprint the ninety-nine volumes originally published by Swaminathan and his team; and to bring out, in supplementary volumes, any new material by Gandhi that may still come to light.

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## TRUTHS ABOUT THE TRICOLOUR

‘[Karnataka state BJP president Ananth] Kumar said Gujarat BJP unit president Rajendra Singh Rana will hand over the original national Tricolour to Uma [Bharti]. This flag was first hoisted by the great freedom fighter Madam Cama at the International Socialists Conference held at Stutgert (sic) in Germany in 1903. As Rana’s forefathers were freedom fighters, Madam Cama had handed over the flag to them’.

Thus ran a news report carried in the Bangalore edition of a national newspaper on the 10th of September, 2004. The mis-spelling of ‘Stuttgart’ was probably the inadvertent fault of the reporter. All other errors, however, were the deliberate handiwork of the political party concerned. For the tiranga jhanda was the work of the Indian National Congress, which was not Madam Cama’s party. And it came into being only in the nineteen twenties, not (as claimed by Ananth Kumar) in 1903.

The idea of the tricolour as we know it was born in the mind of a Andhra Congressman, P. Venkayya of Masulipatnam. Between 1918 and 1921 Venkayya raised the question of a national flag at every session of the Congress. Mahatma Gandhi liked the idea but not the way it was conceived; as he remarked, ‘in his [Venkayya’s] designs I saw nothing to stir the nations to its depths’. Then a north Indian patriot, Lala Hansraj, suggested that any such flag should have, as its centre-piece, the charkha, or spinning wheel. This attracted Gandhi, who told Venkayya to incorporate the feature in his design. The Mahatma also expressed the wish that the National Flag should be in three colours; red to represent the Hindus, green to represent the Muslims, and white to represent peace as well as all the other faiths of India.

At this time, Gandhi favoured having the white band on the top, followed by the green, with red coming last, signifying that the minorities came before the majority, who had the ethical responsibility for their safety and well-being. The charkha, he thought, should be placed so as to cover all three bands. Through the nineteen twenties it became customary to hoist this flag at patriotic events. Speaking at such a ceremony in Ahmedabad in February 1929, Gandhi observed that ‘today, in India, some people hold that Hindus and Muslims will never get on well together, that these incompatibles can never be on good terms now or in the future, that independence here could either be for the Hindus or for the Muslims’. The Mahatma himself dissented from this counsel of despair. ‘If this line of thinking persists’, he said, ‘it is meaningless to hoist this national flag. You who are present here to witness the unfurling of this flag should take a vow that the Hindus, Muslims, and Christians or any other community which regards India as its home, will co-operate with one another for securing swaraj for India’.

However, in August 1931 a committee of the Congress decided to make certain changes in the design. Red was replaced by saffron, which would be placed first. The white band would come next, in between saffron and green, to heighten the effect and ‘show off the whole flag to advantage’. The spinning wheel was retained, but placed in the white strip alone.

Endorsing these changes, Gandhi observed that ‘the national flag is the symbol of non-violence and national unity to be brought about by means strictly truthful and non-violent’. The tricolour, he wrote, ‘represents and reconciles all religions’.

The next modification took place on the eve of Indian independence. A committee of the Constituent Assembly decided that while they would retain the colours and spirit of the tricolour, they needed to make some changes, if only to ensure that the flag of independent India was not identified with the Congress party alone. Finally, it was resolved that the spinning wheel would be replaced by a Asoka Chakra.

When Mahatma Gandhi first heard of this he was dismayed. ‘The Congress has been national from its very inception’, he insisted. ‘It has never been sectional. It embraces all sections and all Indians’. Should not ‘the flag under which the Congress has fought so many non-violent battles ... now be the flag of the Government of free India?’ But he was ultimately persuaded of the change. The colours remained the ones he had chosen, and with the meanings he had given them: unity, non-violence, and social harmony. The Asoka Chakra could be viewed, imaginatively, as a spinning-wheel without the spindle and spinner. As Gandhi now saw it, ‘looking at the wheel some may recall that Prince of Peace, King Asoka, ruler of an empire, who renounced power. He represents all faiths; he was an embodiment of compassion. Seeing the charkha in his chakra adds to the glory of the Charkha. Asoka’s chakra represents the eternally revolving Divine Law of Ahimsa.’

To return now to Madam Cama. She had nothing to do with the real tiranga jhanda. But she did however once hoist a flag on foreign soil, at Stuttgart in fact, but in 1907 rather than 1903. From an account circulating in cyberspace it seems that this too was an attempt to represent Hindu-Muslim harmony—its colours were green, saffron and red, and it contained both a Crescent and a Sun. By placing it before her socialist audience she sought to make the case for Indian independence.

Brave though it was, Madam Cama’s gesture had little effect on the freedom movement. Now it has been rescued from oblivion by the BJP, and given a terrific amount of spin. It is insinuated that this flag is the tricolour as we know and revere it, when it is a quite different creation altogether. And it is claimed that it is in the possession of Uma Bharti, who got it from her party mate Rajendra Singh Rana, to whose forefathers Madam Cama is said to have handed it over. This too is a falsehood, for the Madam’s original flag was deposited at the Maratha and Kesari Library in Pune, where—unless it has recently been purloined—it must still be.

Why does the BJP need to resort to such distortion of the historical record? Most likely because its progenitor, the RSS, took no part in the freedom movement at all. During the thirties and forties, few, if any, RSS workers were seen saluting the national flag. Their allegiances were sectarian rather than national—indeed, they chose to elevate their own bhagwa dhvaj above the tiranga jhanda. Shortly after Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination, there were widespread reports of

RSS activists trampling upon the tricolour. This greatly upset the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. In a speech on the 24th of February 1948, Nehru spoke sorrowfully of how ‘at some places members of the RSS dishonoured the National Flag. They know well that by disgracing the flag they are proving themselves as traitors...’.

The Sangh Parivar has now come round to honouring the tricolour, but their actions suggest that they still do not understand what that flag means. Thus the rhetoric used on the present tiranga yatra of the BJP is designed to divide the peoples of India. In this respect, this yatra is an insult to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi and to countless other freedom fighters who fought, under that flag, for national unity and religious harmony. And, it must finally be said, it is also an insult to the memory of Madame Bhikaji Cama—a socialist and secularist who would have been appalled at being forced to keep posthumous company with Uma Bharti and her ilk.

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## **REFORMING THE HINDUS**

Three men did most to make Hinduism a modern faith. Of these the first was not recognized as a Hindu by the Shankaracharyas; the second was not recognized as a Hindu by himself; the third was born a Hindu but made certain he would not die as one.

These three great reformers were Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and B. R. Ambedkar. Gandhi and Nehru, working together, helped Hindus make their peace with modern ideas of democracy and secularism. Gandhi and Ambedkar, working by contrasting methods and in opposition to one another, made Hindus recognize the evils and horrors of the system of Untouchability. Nehru and Ambedkar, working sometimes together, sometimes separately, forced Hindus to grant, in law if not always in practice, equal rights to their women.

The Gandhi-Nehru relationship has been the subject of countless books down the years. Books on the Congress, which document how these two made the party the principal vehicle of Indian nationalism; books on Gandhi, which have to deal necessarily with the man he chose to succeed him; books on Nehru, which pay proper respect to the man who influenced him more than anyone else. Books too numerous to mention, among which I might be allowed to single out, as being worthy of special mention, Sarvepalli Gopal’s *Jawaharlal Nehru*, B. R. Nanda’s *Mahatma Gandhi*, and Rajmohan Gandhi’s *The Good Boatman*.

In recent years, the Gandhi-Ambedkar relationship has also attracted a fair share of attention. Some of this has been polemical and even petty; as in Arun Shourie’s *Worshipping False Gods* (which is deeply unfair to Ambedkar), and Jabbar Patel’s film *Ambedkar* (which is inexplicably hostile to Gandhi). But there have also been some sensitive studies of the troubled relationship



between the upper caste Hindu who abhorred Untouchability and the greatest of Dalit reformers. These include, on the political side, the essays of Eleanor Zelliott and Denis Dalton; and on the moral and psychological side, D. R. Nagaraj's brilliant little book *The Flaming Feet*.

By contrast, the Nehru-Ambedkar relationship has been consigned to obscurity. There is no book about it, nor, to my knowledge, even a decent scholarly article. That is a pity, because for several crucial years they worked together in the Government of India, as Prime Minister and Law Minister respectively.

Weeks before India became Independent, Nehru asked Ambedkar to join his Cabinet. This was apparently done at the instance of Gandhi, who thought that since freedom had come to India, rather than to the Congress, outstanding men of other political persuasions should also be asked to serve in Government. (Thus, apart from Ambedkar, the Tamil businessman R. K. Shanmukham Chetty, likewise a lifelong critic of the Congress, was made a member of the Cabinet, Finance Minister, no less.)

Ambedkar's work on the Constitution is well known. Less well known are his labours on the reform of Hindu personal laws. Basing himself on a draft prepared by Sir B. N. Rau, Ambedkar sought to bring the varying interpretations and traditions of Hindu law into a single unified Code. But this act of codification was also a act of radical reform, by which the distinctions of caste were made irrelevant, and the rights of women greatly enhanced.

Those who want to explore the details of these changes are directed to Mulla's massive *Principles of Hindu Law* (now in its eighteenth edition), or to the works of the leading authority on the subject, Professor J. D. M. Derrett. For our purposes, it is enough to summarize the major changes as follows; (1) For the first time, the widow and daughter were awarded the same share of property as the son; (2) for the first time, women were allowed to divorce a cruel or negligent husband; (3) for the first time, the husband was prohibited from taking a second wife; (4) for the first time, a man and woman of different castes could be married under Hindu law; (5) for the first time, a Hindu couple could adopt a child of a different caste.

These were truly revolutionary changes, which raised a storm of protest among the orthodox. As Professor Derrett remarked, 'every argument that could be mustered against the protest was garnered, including many that cancelled each other out'. Thus 'the offer of divorce to all oppressed spouses became the chief target of attack, and the cry that religion was in danger was raised by many whose real objection to the Bill was that daughters were to have equal shares with sons, a proposition that aroused (curiously) fiercer jealousy among certain commercial than among agricultural classes'.

In the vanguard of the opposition was the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. In a single year, 1949, the R. S. S. organized as many as 79 meetings in Delhi where effigies of Nehru and Ambedkar were burnt, and where the new Bill was denounced as an attack on Hindu culture and tradition.

A major leader of the movement against the new Bill was a certain Swami Karpatri. In speeches in Delhi and elsewhere, he challenged Ambedkar to a public debate on the new Code. To the Law Minister's claim that the Shastras did not really favour polygamy, Swami Karpatri quoted Yagnavalkya: 'If the wife is a habitual drunkard, a confirmed invalid, a cunning, a barren or a spendthrift woman, if she is bitter-tongued, if she has got only daughters and no son, if she hates her husband, [then] the husband can marry a second wife even while the first is living'. The Swami supplied the precise citation for this injunction: the third verse of the third chapter of the third section of Yagnavalkya's Smriti on marriage. He did not however tell us whether the injunction also allowed the wife to take another husband if the existing one was a drunkard, bitter-tongued, a spendthrift, etc.

But there were also some respectable opponents of the new Code, who included Rajendra Prasad, who in January 1950 became the President of India. In 1950 and 1951 several attempts were made to get the Bill passed. However, the opposition was so intense that it had to be dropped. Ambedkar resigned from the Cabinet in disgust, saying that Nehru had not the 'earnestness and determination' required to back the Bill through to the end.

In truth, Nehru was waiting for the first General Elections. When these gave him and the Congress a popular mandate, he re-introduced the new Code, not as a single Bill but as several separate ones dealing with Marriage and Divorce, Succession, Adoption, etc. Nehru actively canvassed for these reforms, making several major speeches in Parliament and bringing his fellow Congressmen to his side.

In 1955 and 1956 these various Bills passed into law. Soon afterwards Ambedkar died. Speaking in the Lok Sabha, Nehru remarked that he would be remembered above all 'as a symbol of the revolt against all the oppressive features of Hindu society'. But Ambedkar, said Nehru, 'will be remembered also for the great interest he took and the trouble he took over the question of Hindu law reform. I am happy that he saw that reform in a very large measure carried out, perhaps not in the form of that monumental tome that he had himself drafted, but in separate bits'.

As I have said, by the strict canons of orthodoxy Gandhi and Nehru were lapsed Hindus; Ambedkar no Hindu at all. Yet, by force of conviction and strength of character, they did more good to Hindus and Hinduism than those who claimed to be the true defenders of the faith.

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## **PASSAGES THROUGH INDIA**

There is a wonderful book waiting to be written about Western representations of India in the twentieth century. Before and after Independence, the sub-continent attracted an array of

foreign writers determined to dig up the 'truth about India'. Many came to report on Gandhi's struggle for freedom. If they were socialist, they tended to celebrate it; thus works like H. N. Brailsford's *Subject India*, which argued that the sooner the British got out, the better for them and for us. If they were conservative they tended to denigrate it; thus Robert Byron's *An Essay on India*, which suggested that it was only the British who held India together—let them depart, and the sub-continent would witness a thousand bloody battles over caste and religion.

Indian nationalism and British colonialism both sparked strong emotions, pro and con. In 1947 India became free. However, this did not stem or stop the flow of literary travellers from the West. To the contrary, the flow accelerated, especially after neighbouring China went Communist. Now, Western writers came not so much to praise or condemn, but to understand. Among the questions they asked themselves were: Would democracy take root in this culturally diverse and poor country? Would Hindu spiritualism be able to exist with Western materialism? Typically, these questions were sought to be answered by portraits or interviews of a range of 'ordinary' Indians.

I myself have a whole shelf of books about independent India by Western writers. These include accounts by the well known Beat poets Gary Snyder and Allan Ginsberg, accounts redolent with sadhus and spirits and the smell of ganja. There are books by New York Times correspondents on their time in this country, which naturally tend towards the political. There is an account by a black writer from the deep South, which asks whether caste is to India as race is to America. And there is the travelogue by the radical Swedish journalist Jan Myrdal, son of Alva and Gunnar, which plaintively announces, *India Waits* (for a peasant revolution).

A recent addition to this shelf of mine, picked up at Strand Bookshop in New York, is Alexander Campbell's *The Heart of India*, published in 1958 by the venerable firm of Alfred A. Knopf. The author was a Scotsman who served as New Delhi correspondent of *Time* magazine, in between other assignments in Johannesburg and Tokyo. The book's blurb begins in dramatic fashion. 'There has never been a book on India quite like this', it says, adding: 'Not even Katherine Mayo's horrified reports on Hindu superstitions, *Mother India*.'

Like Miss Mayo, Mr Campbell makes it quite plain what he does not like about India: the dirt, the heat, the smells, the sanctimonious preaching of the upper classes, speaking of socialism from their air-conditioned rooms. Still, in between the disgust and disenchantment are some most interesting cameos. Campbell's judgement we can leave to one side, but his reportage endures. Printed in 1958, there are aspects of the book that speak directly to us in 2004. Particularly relevant, it seems to me, are his meetings with a Hindu fundamentalist in Benares and with a Muslim fundamentalist in Karachi.

The Hindu was a Professor, no less, who had travelled widely in the West. Campbell asked him what he felt about the social situation in India after Independence. 'Bharat is still not free!', thundered the Professor. He felt that 'true Hindus are more vilely oppressed than they have ever

been before in their history. Nehru and the Congress Party spurn Hindu ideals and the Hindu way of life. They are trying to make Bharat a mere carbon copy of the West. Worse! They are traitors. Bharat is a living organic whole. It was not shaped by human hands. It has a culture that is one and indivisible, which has flowed down to us in an unbroken stream from the Vedas. Yet the Congress Party conspired with the Socialists, the Communists, and the British Imperialists, to cut Bharat in pieces to appease the Muslims’.

Asked what he proposed to do about this, the Professor answered: ‘The Partition was a crime. It must be revoked.... First, we must take steps to recover the thousands of Hindu women who were forcibly abducted to Pakistan by Moslem rapists. Then we must work and fight for a united India: a revived Bharat. There must be undivided allegiance to Bharat’.

As we know to our cost, there are Professors who speak like this in India still: some, indeed, are even Ministers in the Government of India. But let us now move across the border, to Karachi. Here, Alexander Campbell was introduced to a Muslim religious leader. When asked about current politics, the divine answered: ‘Politics and Politicians! My concern is with higher matters. The people do not read the Koran and think only of their bellies. First they must regain their souls. Pakistan was created to be an instrument of the divine will.... Among unbelievers our deadliest enemy is the Hindu, who tirelessly seeks our destruction. Our fathers knew this well: they knew how to treat Hindus. Sooner or later there must be a jihad—a holy war against the Hindus who slaughtered our men and debauched our women’.

That was the bad news. Now for the good news. From Karachi, Campbell moved on to the city of Lahore. The day after he arrived, his host took him to the railway station to meet a friend travelling from Delhi. When told the visitor was a Hindu the Scotsman was understandably nervous. As he recalled: ‘A large crowd had gathered at the station. They were obviously on hand to meet the trainload of Hindus from Delhi, and despite Ashiq’s assurance I felt rather apprehensive. I had no wish to see a massacre of Hindus... I need not have worried. When the train pulled in and the passengers began to alight, the crowd surged forward, but only in order to shake hands. “They are all cricket fans”, said Ashiq. “Even during the trouble, cricket continued. The Indian cricket team is very popular in Pakistan”.’

To complement Campbell’s account I should supply some necessary details. This was the last week of January 1955, and the Hindus on that train had come to watch India play Pakistan in the Lahore Test. Other Hindus (and Sikhs) had come by bus; all part of what one Pakistani paper, Dawn, described as ‘the biggest mass migration across the frontier since Partition’.

Contemporary accounts suggest that the camaraderie between Hindu and Muslim, Indian and Pakistani, was completely genuine. This is confirmed by the representative of this newspaper who covered the match. This was S. K. Gurunathan, who wrote that ‘great fraternization among the Pakistanis and the Indians was witnessed everywhere during the Test match days’.

As indeed it was during the Lahore Test of 2004. Now, as then, religious fanatics on either side called for the destruction of the other country. Then, as now, it was the cricket fans who spoke and acted otherwise.

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## **THE INDIAN TRADITION OF NON-RENUNCIATION**

Few people, within or outside her Congress party, expected Mrs Sonia Gandhi not to accept the office of Prime Minister after the Indian elections results were out. Her decision to renounce the post in favour of the economist Dr Manmohan Singh has prompted the most extravagant comparisons. Some have gone back as far as Gautama Buddha, who gave up life as a Nepali prince to search for salvation. Others have gone back further—invoking the mythical Lord Rama, who renounced his throne and went into exile so that his father could keep his word.

The best way to appreciate Sonia Gandhi's act, however, is to set it not against ancient history or myth, but against the practice of her own family. By the evidence of his biographer, S. Gopal, there were no fewer than seven occasions on which Jawaharlal Nehru threatened to resign as Prime Minister. In February 1948, bowed by Mahatma Gandhi's assassination and the continuing violence in Kashmir, he told the Governor-General that he 'might have to consider my position in Government'. Two years later, when bloody riots broke out in East Pakistan, Nehru offered to resign and work to stop them. In March 1950 he wrote to the President (India by now being a Republic) that 'it is my intention, soon after the Budget is passed, to offer you my resignation...'. Towards the end of that year, the elevation, against his will, of a conservative candidate to the post of Congress President prompted him to think again of quitting. He could not 'possibly continue to function' after receiving 'a public slap' on his face: he saw 'no point in my being Prime Minister in these circumstances'.

The first few years of Indian independence were a time of great stress and conflict. Faced with religious violence, with war against Pakistan, with dissension in his own party, one can sympathize with Nehru's dilemmas. But it is noteworthy that these hesitancies persisted even after the situation stabilized, and he had asserted his authority over both party and government. Thus in September 1954 he said he was tired and wished to retire. Four years later the thought returned. In April 1958 he told a meeting of Congress M. P.'s that he wished to become a private citizen, as he 'was not in tune with many things.... not in tune with the country, not in tune with the organization'.

Nehru was deeply ambivalent about power. By instinct and upbringing a rebel, he could not quite reconcile himself to the post of head of Government. As he once wrote to C. Rajagopalachari, 'throughout my public life I have drawn my strength chiefly from contacts with the people. These contacts grow less and less and I find no recompense for them in my new environment.'

As Prime Minister, divorced from intimate contact with the people, Nehru found that he worked 'more as an automaton in a routine way rather than as an active and living person'. Hence the desire to immerse himself once more in society—as he put it, 'if I have to be of any real use in the future, I must find my roots again'.

Each time, Nehru was persuaded that to resign would be to run away from responsibility. In retrospect, it might have been better for his reputation if he had resigned after he had spent a decade in office. Lord Mountbatten once claimed that if Nehru had died in 1958 he would have been regarded as the greatest statesman of the twentieth century. This might also have been the case if he had resigned rather than died—for his greatest achievements were behind him in 1958, while his failures were yet to come.

In the event, Nehru came to spend seventeen uninterrupted years in office. His daughter, Indira Gandhi, was Prime Minister for almost as long. There is no evidence of her ever wishing to voluntarily relinquish the post. On one occasion, however, she was almost compelled to do so. On June 12, 1975, the Allahabad High Court found her guilty of electoral malpractices. Her lawyer, as well as some close friends, advised her to resign pending an appeal in the Supreme Court. They thought that decorum demanded this, and in any case abdication in favour of some other Congressman would be temporary, since she was likely to win her appeal.

Other friends thought otherwise. Party loyalists organized massive rallies on the streets of Delhi in support of Mrs Gandhi. At a meeting of the Congress Parliamentary Party, it was announced that there was no question of a change in Prime Minister, since Indira was India and India was Indira. It soon became clear that the nation was indeed identified with the individual. On 26 June a national emergency was proclaimed. Opposition leaders were jailed, the press curbed, and a dictatorship proclaimed in intent and, with the help of amendments to the Constitution, in law.

In 1977 the Emergency was lifted. Mrs Gandhi lost the elections she called, but two-and-a-half years later returned as Prime Minister. In November 1984 she was assassinated. Her son, Rajiv, was appointed in her place. At that time he had been in politics for only three years, and was not even a member of the Cabinet.

Jawaharlal Nehru thought that the Prime Ministership was a duty. Mrs Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi seemed to think it was a right. Their eagerness to embrace, even to cling to, power, are in keeping with one kind of Hindu tradition—the tradition of non-renunciation. In an important book, the anthropologist T. N. Madan has argued that it is a mistake to overemphasise the importance of renunciation in Hindu tradition. For sanyas is only one of four stages in a person's life. As Madan argues, the texts and doctrines place as much emphasis on the stage of grihasta. The head of the household has a crucial obligation to care for the material and other needs of his family members. In this respect, Mrs Indira Gandhi appeared sometimes to act as if India was a household of which she, as Prime Minister, was in sole charge. She certainly treated dissent with the same contempt as does a male grihasta of a Hindu household.

In 1984, Rajiv Gandhi did not think that lack of experience was a handicap to his assuming the office of Prime Minister. Like his mother and grandfather, but with far less reason, he took it for granted that if the Congress was in power there was no other person qualified for the post. Twenty years later, his widow turned down the job, although she had, in a manner of speaking, fully earned it. Since becoming Congress President in 1998 she has worked hard to renew the party, campaigning in three General Elections to help bring it back to power. But when victory finally came, she turned her back on the main prize.

Some have seen Sonia Gandhi's refusal to be Prime Minister as being in keeping with the Indian tradition of renunciation. Following T. N. Madan, one may question how significant this tradition has been in the first place—for is not non-renunciation more the way of the Hindu? Be that as it may, it is clear that Sonia Gandhi's act was emphatically not in keeping with the traditions of the Indian family into which she married. Despite the entreaties of her followers—these shown on national television for all to see—she understood that Sonia was not the Congress, still less India. Her own mother-in-law would have been ashamed of her.

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## **FIVE MYTHS ABOUT JAWAHARLAL NEHRU**

In this, the week of the fortieth death anniversary of Jawaharlal Nehru, let us consider some of the myths that have gathered around his name and his legacy:

Myth 1: Nehru promoted a 'dynasty'

This myth draws support from the fact that Nehru's daughter and grandson also served as Prime Minister, that his granddaughter-in-law has sought that post too, and, most recently, that her son, Nehru's great-grandson, has joined politics as the heir-apparent of the Congress party.

In truth, Nehru had nothing to do with the 'dynasty'. He had no idea, nor desire, that his daughter would become Prime Minister of India. It was Mrs Indira Gandhi who converted the Indian National Congress into a family business. She first brought in her son Sanjay and, after his death, his brother Rajiv. In each case, it was made clear that the son would succeed Mrs Gandhi as head of Congress and head of Government. Thus, the 'Nehru-Gandhi dynasty' should properly be known as the '(Indira) Gandhi' dynasty.

Myth 2: Nehru was an unworthy successor to Gandhi—in fact, he 'betrayed' the Master, while the Master made a 'mistake' in choosing him

This myth is comprehensively demolished by Rajmohan Gandhi in his book *The Good Boatman*. There, he shows that Gandhi preferred Nehru to the alternatives because he most reliably

reflected the pluralist, inclusive idea of India that the Mahatma stood for. The alternatives—Patel, Rajaji, Azad, Kripalani, Rajendra Prasad—had, by contrast, somewhat sectional interests and affiliations. But Nehru was a Hindu who could be trusted by Muslims, a UP wallah who was respected in the South, a man who was admired by women—like Gandhi, and like no one else, he was a genuinely all-India leader.

### Myth 3: Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel were opponents and adversaries

This myth is promoted by advocates of a ‘strong’ India, by those who believe that Nehru was soft on Pakistan, soft on China, and soft on the minorities. It is usually accompanied by a subsidiary myth, namely, that Patel would have made a ‘better’ Prime Minister than Nehru.

In truth, Nehru and Patel worked superbly as a team—they were the duumvirate who, in the first, formative years of independence, effectively united and strengthened India. Of course, they differed by temperament and ideology. But these differences were subsumed and transcended by commitment to a common ideal: namely, a free, united, secular and democratic India. There were some things Nehru could do better than Patel—communing with the masses, relating to the world, assuring vulnerable groups (such as Muslims, tribals, and Dalits) that they enjoyed equal rights with other Indians. There were some things Patel could do better than Nehru—dealing with the princes, nurturing the Congress party, carrying along dissidents in the Constituent Assembly. Each knew the other’s gifts, each took care not to trespass on the other person’s turf. That is how, together, they built India anew out of the ruins of Partition.

The myth of their rivalry is best answered in their own words. After Gandhi died, Nehru wrote to Patel of how ‘the old controversies have ceased to have much significance and it seems to me that the urgent need of the hour is for all of us to function as closely and co-operatively as possible’. In all the years they had worked together, said Nehru, ‘my affection and regard for you has grown, and I do not think anything can happen to lessen this. ... Anyway, in this crisis that we have to face now after Bapu’s death I think it is my duty and, if I may venture to say, yours also for us to face it together as friends and colleagues.’

Patel, in reply, spoke of how he was ‘deeply touched, indeed overwhelmed, by the affection and warmth of your letter...’. He went on: ‘We have both been lifelong comrades in a common cause. The paramount interests of our country and our mutual love and regard, transcending such differences of outlook and temperament as existed, have held us together’. And Gandhi’s death had only awakened ‘a fresh realisation of how much we have achieved together and the need for further joint efforts in our grief-stricken country’s interests’.

### Myth 4: Nehru was ‘autocratic’

This myth is given credence by Nehru’s not having close friends, and by his failure to name a successor.



It is true that Nehru could appear superior, not least to his colleagues in party and government. They did not share his cosmopolitan outlook, nor his interest in art, music, literature, or science. But no one did more than Nehru to nurture the values and institutions of democracy in India. It was he who first advocated adult suffrage, he who welcomed a constructive Opposition, he who scrupulously maintained the independence of the bureaucracy and the judiciary. Vincent Sheean once pointed to ‘one overwhelming difference between Mahatma Gandhi and Mr. Nehru: the Mahatma would rather retire, fast, pray, take care of lepers and educate children, than go along with a majority opinion in which he could not concur’. Nehru, on the other hand, had in many instances ‘yielded to the majority of his party and of the country...’. Thus Congress Chief Ministers were always elected by the legislators of the concerned state, regardless of Nehru’s opinion in the matter. And once he saw that both party and country wanted it, Nehru yielded to the formation of linguistic states—a policy he was personally opposed to.

Nehru chose not to nominate a successor because he felt that was the prerogative of the people and their representatives. After his death, an otherwise bitter critic, D. F. Karaka, saluted this determination ‘not to indicate any preference with regard to his successor. This, [Nehru] maintained, was the privilege of those who were left behind. He himself was not concerned with that issue’—thus, incidentally, giving the lie to the idea that he ever wanted his daughter to succeed him.

Myth 5: Nehru imposed a centralized, ‘Stalinist’ model of economic development on India, thus setting us back by decades.

This is a myth promoted by those who favour quicker and greater liberalization of the economy. In truth, there was a widespread consensus on the import-substituting model of economic development followed by India after independence. Not just Russia, but Japan and Germany were held up as examples in this regard. For one thing, the experience of colonization had made Indians wary of the excessive and sometimes pernicious influence of foreign capital. For another, Indian industry itself demanded protection as well as state support and subsidy. Indeed, the Bombay Plan of 1944, signed by all the major capitalists of the time, called for active state intervention in sectors such as power, water, transport, mines, and the like—pleading that since the capitalists did not have the resources to develop these sectors, the state was duty-bound to do so.

This is not an argument about the respective merits of free versus closed trade and capital regimes. It is an argument about why we chose the path of industrialization that we did. And the answer is this—because industrialists, scientists, economists and politicians, of all stripes and ideologies, by-and-large concurred with Nehru. Or rather, Nehru concurred with them.

No man was more adored in his lifetime than Jawaharlal Nehru; no man more villified since his death. The villification rests, in good part, on myths spread by the motivated and swallowed by

the credulous. And the adoration? What did it rest on? I shall provide the answer, or at any rate my answer, in a future column.

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## THE MYSORE GENERATION

British colonialists and Indian nationalists were agreed on one thing: the utter worthlessness of most of the Maharajas and Nawabs of princely India. These rulers were viewed as feckless and dissolute, over-fond of racing horses and unattached women and holidays in Europe. A British observer wrote in the early twentieth century that the States were ‘sinks of reaction and incompetence and unrestrained autocratic power sometimes exercised by vicious and deranged individuals’. This was also the view of the main nationalist party, the Congress. From the nineteen twenties, they pressed the Rulers to at least match the British in modernizing their institutions and in allowing a modicum of political representation. Under the Congress umbrella rested the All India States Peoples Conference, to which in turn were affiliated the individual Praja Mandals (or peoples’ societies) of the States.

Even in their heyday the Princes enjoyed a bad press. Both the Congress and the Raj thought that they cared too little for mundane matters of administration. This was mostly true, but there were exceptions. One was the state of Baroda, whose great Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad encouraged modern education and worked for the abolition of Untouchability (it was he who endowed a travelling scholarship to that gifted boy from a low-caste home, B. R. Ambedkar). A second, which is the subject of this column, was the state of Mysore, which had the good fortune to be ruled by a series of progressive Maharajas who recruited still more progressive Diwans.

The princely state of Mysore was never a democracy. Power was tightly controlled by the (generally overweight) Ruler and his (usually Brahmin) advisers. It was undoubtedly an autocracy, but, as autocracies go, a rather enlightened one. Between them, the Maharajas and their Dewans started modern industries (including a steel mill), ran efficient railways, built an impressive network of irrigation canals, patronized great musicians and artists, and created and nurtured first-rate colleges. In its pomp, which ran roughly from 1910 to 1945, the state of Mysore was a very interesting place indeed. In those years, if you were young, talented, and ambitious, and if you had the luck to be born in the State, you might go a very long way in this world.

As many young men in fact did. Some of them feature in the pages of the soon-to-be published memoirs of the photographer T. S. Satyan, which I have had the privilege of reading. Born in 1923, reared and educated in Mysore, Satyan’s boyhood friends included the likes of R. K. Narayan, the first of the now distinguished line of Indo-Anglian novelists; R. K. Laxman, one of

the greatest cartoonists in the world; M. N. Srinivas, without question India's most eminent social anthropologist; C. D. Narasimhaiah, the most celebrated English teacher and critic of his generation; and Doreswamy Iyengar, arguably the finest veena player of his generation. A little older than Satyan, but also from Mysore, was the pioneering librarian and historian of publishing, B. S. Kesavan. A little younger was A. K. Ramanujan, the great poet, folklorist, and translator, who did so much to bring the riches of classical Tamil and Kannada literature to the modern world.

While the fame of these men spread far beyond Mysore, they were all shaped by the town, by its culture and its teachers especially. Most of them studied at the Maharaja's College, an institution known for the high quality of its instruction in the humanities. In the great Presidency towns, Madras, Bombay and Calcutta, bright young men flocked to the study of the sciences. But in Mysore it seems the liberal arts were reckoned to be at least as attractive. Certainly the teachers were top-class. Not least in philosophy, where the faculty included, at various times, A. R. Wadia, M. Hiriyanna, and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.

In a culture more sensitive to history than ours, there would by now be a dozen books written on the Mysore of the early twentieth century. Even to the unprejudiced eye, the 'Mysore Generation' seems to be as variously gifted as the 'Bloomsbury Group'—and yet there is a whole shelf of books on the latter, not one on the former.

This is a shocking state of affairs. Someone must soon address it—does anyone know of a young historian with enterprise and energy, and a command of Kannada? If such a candidate presents himself, I would advise him to buy a tape recorder and take it first to the Delhi home of H. Y. Sharada Prasad, the critic and columnist who is a Mysore man through and through. After he has recorded what Sharada Prasad has to say, he should proceed to the old home town itself, to seek the memories of Satyan and the imperishable CDN. En route he might stop in Poona, to pick the mind of R. K. Laxman. After this is done he can turn to the printed record, to the books, pamphlets, newspapers and letters which might shed more light on the Mysore of the years between the two World Wars.

Only a detailed cultural history of Mysore can answer the question—how come so many brilliant people emerged at roughly the same time from the same small town in Southern India? But it must also ask, and answer, a supplementary question—how come they were all men? For it seems to me that in this respect Mysore fell somewhat behind the other exceptional states in princely India, such as Baroda and Travancore, where women were more educated, and more emancipated. The first lady doctors in India came from Travancore. And the first woman Vice Chancellor in India, way back in the nineteen fifties, was Hansa Mehta of the M. S. University of Baroda. But why was it that the Mysore Generation included no women?

A history of Mysore must also explain how, and why, the city lost its place of cultural pre-eminence. Here my own home town, Bangalore, shall probably emerge in the role of a

spoilsport. Once it was chosen as the capital of the new state of Mysore, it became a rival centre of patronage. The money and interest shifted to institutions in Bangalore. Mysore declined, but slowly. Through the fifties and sixties it remained a centre of Kannada literature. Teaching in the city then were three giants, K. V. Puttappa (Kuvempu) and Gopalkrishna Adiga, who were contemporaries, and U. R. Anantha Murty, who was much younger. But then in 1960, Kuvempu retired, and Adiga moved to Sagar. Finally, in the nineteen eighties, Anantha Murty also left Mysore, for Bangalore.

In recent years I have visited Mysore often. The weeds in the parks and the paint peeling off the buildings speak of a larger decline. This is no longer a centre of cultural life, indeed no longer a centre of anything. But perhaps one should not grieve too much. For this little town has contributed mightily to the life of the nation. The novels of Narayan, the cartoons of Laxman, the photographs of Satyan and his brother Nagarajan, the translations and essays of Ramanujan, the social anthropological studies of M. N. Srinivas, the poems and stories of Kuvempu—these, and more, are the bequest of the Mysore Generation to the consciousness of modern India. Their work has become our life.

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### **AMERICAN PRIDE AND POWER**

The best second-hand bookstore in India is located not in Kolkata's College Street but in my home town, Bangalore. This is Select Bookshop, which was founded in 1945 by a lawyer named K. B. K. Rao. In six decades the store has shifted location as many times: once on Mahatma Gandhi Road, then in Malleswaram, it now lies in a quiet cul-de-sac off the busy Brigade Road, in the heart of the city. The shop is run by Rao's son K. K. S. Murty, whose original profession was that of an aeronautical engineer; in time it will pass on to his son Sanjay, who was trained as an accountant.

I have been a Select regular for close to thirty years now. In this period it has served as a consoling constant in a state of flux. Tiled bungalows give way to skyscrapers of glass and concrete, pensioners are supplanted by software nerds. But the persistence of this little civilized bookshop through three generations assures me that some part of Bangalore will never change.

Select has supplied me with cricket books, with P. G. Wodehouse first editions, with the stories of Chekhov. But above all it has kept me supplied with the materials essential to my trade as a historian. I have turned to it for rare pamphlets by Tagore, for obscure biographies of Gandhi, and for secret reports by the colonial state. Most of all, I have gone to the bookshop for runs of now extinct journals.

In the past, I have found rare issues of Ramananda Chatterjee's *Modern Review* in *Select*; also volumes of C. Rajagopalachari's *Swarajya*. But when I last visited the shop the owner directed me to a pile of back numbers of a journal that was neither dead nor Indian. This was the *American Scholar*, a quarterly published by the Phi Beta Kappa that advertised itself as being 'for the independent thinker'.

I have been reading the *American Scholar* for about a decade now. In that time I have known it as a bridge between the two cultures of science and literature. I have read here elegantly worded essays about the progress of astronomy, but also ethnographic accounts of tribals in the Andamans. The journal specializes in the memoir, a genre that greatly appeals to me, but which is somehow not very popular in India or among Indians.

In my own, admittedly brief acquaintance with the *American Scholar*, I have not known it to be particularly interested in politics. Evidently things were once otherwise. Thus two of the issues I picked up in the *Select Bookshop* contained sharp and still relevant reflections on America's place in the world. The first was penned by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, a thinker and teacher legendary in his time, if somewhat forgotten in ours. Entitled 'American Pride and Power', it served as the editorial to the Autumn 1948 issues of *The American Scholar*.

'Powerful men and nations', wrote Niebuhr, 'are in greater peril from their own illusions than from their neighbors' hostile designs'. America, he noted, has 'achieved a degree of power in the contemporary world community which dwarfs the dominions of the empires of the past'. However, it was now 'in obvious danger of being beguiled by the pride which tends to corrupt the powerful. One form of this pride is the pretension that our power is the natural fruit of our virtue'. Hence 'the illusion that our economic strength, which is the obvious source of our political authority, is the fruit of a wisdom which no other nation has achieved'.

Niebuhr went on to speak of the peculiar circumstances of American economic success, of the fact that it was founded on the possession of a large, sparsely populated continent and sustained by the dazzling development of technology. He ended with this warning: 'The more we indulge in an uncritical reverence for the supposed wisdom of our American way of life, the more odious we make it in the eyes of the world, and the more we destroy our moral authority, without which our economic and military power will become impotent'.

The specific context of Niebuhr's article was supplied by America's relationship with Europe. Where the American mainland had never been subject to enemy attack, Europe had been ravaged by war. Through the Marshall Plan, America was seeking to rebuild the economies of Europe. But with this aid went a lot of sanctimonious preaching about the superiority of the American way of life. This was creating resentment in countries such as France, which historically saw itself as the carrier of a universal civilization too. It was thus that Niebuhr was urging an appropriate humility to America, and a respect for the ways of life and thought of other peoples on the planet.

Eleven years after Niebuhr's piece, the American Scholar carried another warning about imperial arrogance. This was J. A. Lukacs's 'The American Imperial Disease', which was published as the lead article in the Spring 1959 issue. The essay began by charting the global ambitions of the United States, especially as manifested since the Second World War. By the late fifties, American troops were stationed in the Mediterranean, in Central Europe, in the Middle East, even in the Arctic. Himself a historian of European extraction, Lukacs remarked: 'In my lifetime I have seen what has happened to great European nations when they had been bitten by the imperial bug and soaked with the arguments of a Chosen People. I am now seeing what this is doing to Russia. I do not like to speculate what the further propagation of the imperialist virus might do to the qualities of the American people'.

Much of this American expansionism was, of course, justified by the rivalry of the Cold War. As Lukacs put it, 'it is now an accepted axiom of our government that everything we do must be related to our imperial position vis-a-vis Russia: that we must outproduce, outshout, outeducate, outpropagandize, outbomb, outspy, outfinance and outdance the Russians whenever and wherever possible'.

The bipolar world of the fifties and sixties was contributing greatly to the cycle of violence. Russia cultivated client regimes; America answered by sponsoring clients of its own. The followers of each side then went to war. In the shadows lurked the patrons, supplying arms and materials. In his native Europe, Lukacs had been witness to the costs of competitive nationalism. Now, he worried of what would happen if his adopted land continued to set itself up against the other superpower. Thus he asked, in anguish: 'Are Americans no longer able or willing to see the dangers in trying to become the Scoutmasters of the World? What will this do to the soul and body of this great nation?'

Lukacs sought hope in a world that would have not one, not two, but multiple poles of influence. In his view, 'strategically, politically and culturally, the best hope for these United States is the emergence of a truly independent Europe, and not a "united" Europe tied to American atomic power lines and purse strings'.

Thirty years after these words were written the Soviet Union collapsed. But American imperial ambitions have not been checked. They are now justified by the new enemy, that of radical Islam. American troops are still there in force in the Middle East and the Mediterranean; but also in places where they never ventured before, such as West Africa and Afghanistan. As in the forties, and fifties and sixties, America cannot resist the temptation to act as the Scoutmaster of the world. It cannot resist the tendency to see itself as not just the most powerful, but also the most virtuous country in the world. The warnings of Reinhold Niebuhr and J. A. Lukacs have a markedly contemporary ring to them. It might not be a bad idea for the American Scholar to reprint their articles, and then distribute issues of the journal, free, in the Pentagon and the Senate, but also among the occupying forces in Baghdad and Kabul. Published in The Hindu, 11/4/2004

## HINDI CHAUVINISM

I have recently been reading the debates of the Constituent Assembly of India. These are a treasure-trove; invaluable to the scholar, but also well worth reading by the citizen. Among the topics debated by the Assembly were federalism, minority rights, preventive detection—topics that were contentious then, and continue to be contentious now. However, by far the most controversial subject was language: the language to be spoken in the House, the language in which the Constitution would be written, the language which would be given that singular designation, ‘national’.

On the 10th of December 1946, effectively the first day of business, R. V. Dhulekar of the United Provinces moved an amendment. When he began speaking in Hindustani, the Chairman reminded him that many members did not know the language. This was Dhulekar’s reply: ‘People who do not know Hindustani have no right to stay in India. People who are present in this House to fashion a Constitution for India and do not know Hindustani are not worthy to be members of this Assembly. They had better leave’.

The remarks created a commotion in the House. ‘Order, order!’, yelled the Chairman, but Dhulekar then moved that ‘the Procedure Committee should frame rules in Hindustani and not in English. As an Indian I appeal that we, who are out to win freedom for our country and are fighting for it should think and speak in our own language. We have all along been talking of America, Japan, Germany, Switzerland and House of Commons. It has given me a headache. I wonder why Indians do not speak in their own language. As an Indian I feel that the proceedings of the House should be conducted in Hindustani. We are not concerned with the history of the world. We have the history of our own country of millions of past years’.

The printed proceedings continue:

‘The Chairman: Order, order!

Shri R. V. Dhulekar (speaking still in Hindustani): I request you to allow me to move my amendment.

The Chairman: Order, order! I do not permit you to proceed further. The House is with me that you are out of order.’

At this point Dhulekar finally shut up. But the issue would not go away. In one session, members urged the House to order the Government to change all car number plates from English to Hindi. More substantively, they demanded that the official version of the Constitution be in Hindi, with an unofficial version in English. This the Drafting Committee did not accept, saying that the foreign language could better articulate the technical and legal terms of the document. When a

draft Constitution was placed for discussion, members asked for a discussion of each clause in Hindi. To adopt a document written in English, they said, would be 'insulting'.

Under the British, English had emerged as the language of higher education and administration. Would it remain in this position after the British left? The politicians of the North thought that it should be replaced by Hindi. The politicians and people of the South preferred that English continue as the vehicle of inter-provincial communication.

Jawaharlal Nehru himself was exercised early by the question. In an essay of the late thirties he expressed his admiration for the major provincial languages. Without 'infringing in the least on their domain', said Nehru, there must still be an all-India language of communication. English was too far removed from the masses; so he opted instead for Hindustani, which he defined as a 'golden mean' between Hindi and Urdu.

Like Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi thought that Hindustani could unite North with South and Hindu with Muslim. It, rather than English, should be the *rashtrabhasha*, or national language. As he saw it, 'Urdu diction is used by Muslims in writing. Hindi diction is used by Sanskrit pundits. Hindustani is the sweet mingling of the two'. In 1945 he engaged in a lively exchange with Purushottamdas Tandon, a man who fought hard, not to say heroically, to rid Hindi of its foreign elements. Tandon was Vice President of the All India Hindi Literature Conference, which held that Hindi with the Devanagari script alone should be the national language. Gandhi, who had long been a member of the Conference, was dismayed by its chauvinist drift. Since he believed that both the Nagari and Urdu scripts should be used, perhaps it was time to resign his membership. Tandon tried to dissuade him, but, as Gandhi put it, 'How can I ride two horses? Who will understand me when I say that *rashtrabhasha*=Hindi and *rashtrabhasha*=Hindi+Urdu=Hindustani?'

Partition more-or-less killed the case for Hindustani. The move to further Sanskritize Hindi gathered pace. One can see this at work in the Constituent Assembly, where early references were to Hindustani, but later references all to Hindi. After the division of the country the promoters of Hindi became even more fanatical. As Granville Austin observes, 'The Hindi-wallahs were ready to risk splitting the Assembly and the country in their unreasoning pursuit of uniformity'. Their crusade provoked some of the most heated debates in the House. Hindustani would not have been acceptable to South Indians; Hindi, even less so. Whenever a member spoke in Hindi another member would ask for a translation into English. When the case was made for Hindi to be the sole national language, it was bitterly opposed. Representative are these remarks of T. T. Krishnamachari of Madras:

'We disliked the English language in the past. I disliked it because I was forced to learn Shakespeare and Milton, for which I had no taste at all... [I]f we are going to be compelled to learn Hindi... I would perhaps not be able to do it because of my age, and perhaps I would not be willing to do it because of the amount of constraint you put on me. ... This kind of intolerance



makes us fear that the strong Centre which we need, a strong Centre which is necessary will also mean the enslavement of people who do not speak the language of the Centre. I would, Sir, convey a warning on behalf of people of the South for the reason that there are already elements in South India who want separation...., and my honourable friends in U. P. do not help us in any way by flogging their idea [of] “Hindi Imperialism” to the maximum extent possible. Sir, it is up to my friends in U. P. to have a whole-India; it is up to them to have a Hindi-India. The choice is theirs....’

The Assembly finally arrived at a compromise; that ‘the official language of the Union shall be Hindi in the Devanagari script’; but for ‘fifteen years from the commencement of the Constitution, the English language shall continue to be used for all the official purposes of the Union for which it was being used immediately before such commencement’. Till 1965, at any rate, the proceedings of the courts, the services, and the all-India bureaucracy would be conducted in English.

In 1965 attempts were made to introduce Hindi by force, sparking widespread protests in Tamil Nadu. In 1967, the DMK rode to power in Tamil Nadu on the back of these protests. Wisely, the Union Government extended the use of English in inter-state communication. But from time to time the chauvinists of Hindi try to press their case. In his previous term as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav wrote a letter in his language to the Chief Minister of Kerala, E. K. Nayanar. Mr Nayanar replied in his language. It was a brilliant riposte: for while Hindi was not widely spoken in Thiruvananthapuram, in Lucknow Malayalam was not known at all.

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## **CRICKET ON THE VELD**

There is a cricket World Cup now in South Africa, and watching the tournament on TV shall doubtless take me back to the one time I did visit the country. That was back in October 1997. Apartheid had recently been vanquished, and the greatest man the world has known since Mahatma Gandhi was in power. The country itself was something like India in 1947, full of hope and foreboding. A righteous political struggle had been rewarded with victory, but the rebels-turned-governors had now to contend with a deeply divided and fearfully violent society.

Nowhere do the residues of history lie so thick and bloody on the ground as in South Africa. In the ten days I was there I did not have the heart to talk or think cricket. I went to Lord’s the first week I was in London, to the Melbourne Cricket Ground immediately after checking into my hotel. But since South African cricket had, over the years, partaken so fully of the crimes of

apartheid, it was impossible for me to visit Wanderers or Newland, although I spent time in the cities in which they are located.

If I thought of cricket at all on that trip, it was of the discrimination that black cricketers had once been subject to. I remembered the story of Basil D'Oliveira, born in Cape Town, but because of the colour of his skin not allowed to take part in first-class cricket at home. He knew, however, that he had the talent to play at the highest level. Encouraged by an Indian friend, 'Dolly' wrote to John Arlott asking him to recommend him to a league club in England. (Arlott, by the way, was almost unique within the English cricket establishment in being an opponent of apartheid. When he visited South Africa in 1948–9, and was made to fill in the noxious immigration form, against the category 'race' he simply wrote 'human.')

Arlott got him an initial assignment with a league club in Lancashire, and Dolly's game quickly took him further up the ladder. He first played for England in 1966. Two years later he was selected for the M. C. C. tour of South Africa. But the racists would not have him, and cancelled the tour.

Wisden Cricketers' Almanack lists Basil D'Oliveira as being of Worcestershire and England. His original cricketing affiliation, however, was to St. Augustine's Cricket Club in Cape Town. The club was started in 1899 by Reverend Lewis, a parish priest at St. Paul's Church in Bree Street, who thought that sport would serve to keep 'idle youth' out of trouble. Dolly learnt his early cricket at the Green Point Common, right under Table Mountain. In the mid fifties, however, the Cape Coloured were displaced from the city under the notorious Group Areas Act. The community took the St. Augustine's Cricket Club with them. As described so vividly in D'Oliveira's autobiography, the coloured cricketers had now now to make do with bumpy wickets, carved out of rough ground on the city's outskirts. Dolly went on to England to make his name, but years later another Augustinian, Paul Adams, became the first Cape Coloured to play Test cricket for his native land.

My adult consciousness would dwell on the case of Basil D'Oliveira. But when I was a boy I probably didn't think of it much. In any case, it didn't stop me from admiring white South African cricketers. The Government of India considered the apartheid regime to be the embodiment of evil, but it could scarcely disallow the entry of cricket books published in England. These told me stories of the Rowan brothers, of the Nourses, father and son, of the googly bowlers of the early decades of the century (Vogler, Schwarz, Faulkner), and of Jack Cheetham's fine team of the fifties, the quality of whose fielding put into the shade their own talented batsmen (McGlew and Mclean) and bowlers (Adcock, Heine, and most of all, Tayfield).

But of course for an Indian of my generation it was the South African side of 1969–70 that one knew, or knew of, best. It was all-white, true, but it was also the best side in the world. They thrashed Bill Lawry's Australians four-nil, this just after the Aussies had comprehensively beaten India. In the summer of 1970 the South African tour of England was cancelled, and the apartheid regime finally banned by the International Cricket Council. Ali Bacher's great side would play no more Test cricket. Meanwhile, Indian cricket underwent a surprising

transformation, and in 1971 successively beat West Indies and England, each time playing away from home.

After these victories the Indian captain, Ajit Wadekar, expressed regret that his side could not play the South Africans for the title of 'world champions'. We knew this to be bravado, a challenge thrown in the safe knowledge that it could not, in the prevailing political climate, ever be accepted. For how would our bowlers bowl to Barry Richards or Eddie Barlow or Grahame Pollock? Or our batsmen face up to the pace and bounce of Mike Procter and Peter Pollock?

Some answers were provided twenty years later, when India finally did play South Africa. They came here in 1991 to contest three one-dayers, and made a tremendous impression with their fielding. In the first match in Bombay Jonty Rhodes effected two run-outs and took three catches, one of which was taken at full stretch, body at least four feet off the ground. We had read of Colin Bland, the South African who once ran out an English batsman by throwing a ball between his pads to hit the stumps. But Rhodes appeared akin to one of those characters out of Hindu mythology, taking off in the air to do battle with someone a million miles away. As for the other members of the team, we noticed that a few could bat straight, and one, Allan Donald, could bowl very fast indeed.

The next winter India went to South Africa for a full tour. Ajit Wadekar was the manager of the Indian side, and I wonder whether he ever recalled the challenge he had once offered. India were beaten easily in both varieties of the game. The South African side of the 1990s seemed more akin to the side of the 1950s than the 1970s. One outstanding bowler (now Donald, then Tayfield), some useful back-ups, four or five passable batsmen, ten or eleven exceptional fielders.

In the decade since they re-entered international cricket South Africa have produced perhaps three world-class cricketers: Allan Donald, Shaun Pollock, and Jacques Kallis. By contrast, the side of the 1970s was staggeringly talented. There were four all-rounders of close to world-class: Procter, Barlow, Trevor Goddard and Denis Lindsay (a stumper with a huge appetite for runs). Add to them a fast and hostile new ball bowler, Peter Pollock, and two of the greatest batsmen in the history of the game. These were Barry Richards, who was good enough to be chosen in Don Bradman's all-time eleven, and Graeme Pollock. The last named remains my favourite South African cricketer. All I have seen of him is fifteen minutes of film. Five would have convinced me of his genius. He was a big man, yet stroked the ball with an almost feline grace. He looked somewhat like a right-handed Zaheer Abbas, only better and much more at ease against pace.

Despite my politics, I am almost sorry that I could not see this South African side play against India in the seventies. I cannot however believe that dear old Ajit Wadekar has, on this score, any regrets at all.

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## **POLITICS AND CURRENT AFFAIRS**

### **A Wish List Revisited**

In an essay published just before the General Elections of 2009, I had argued that for Indian democracy to become more focused and effective, four things needed to happen:

First, the Congress party had to rid itself of its dependence on a single family. Rahul Gandhi had a right to be in politics, but not to assume that only he or his mother would be the most powerful person in their party;

Second, the Bharatiya Janata Party had to rid itself of its dependence on the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, and reinvent itself as a right-of-centre party with understated (rather than militant) views on religion, thus to become less like Islamic jihadists and more like German Christian Democrats;

Third, the parliamentary communist parties had to become more alert to the promise of entrepreneurial innovation and modern technologies, and less beholden to the profoundly anti-democratic ideas of Lenin and Stalin. At the same time, I hoped the CPI(M) and the CPI would merge into one party, and then persuade the Maoists to abandon armed struggles and enter the democratic process as well;

Fourth, the emerging middle class, growing in numbers and influence, could start a national party of its own. This would be open to all regardless of caste, religion, or ethnicity, and outline a forward-looking agenda for the nation.

This wish-list, naturally, was offered more in hope than in expectation. Three-and-a-years later, does it look more or less unrealistic when first articulated?

Consider, first, the state of the Congress. It is clearer than ever before that the stranglehold of the Gandhi-Nehrus has hurt it very greatly. The charisma of the First Family fades with every successive generation. As demonstrated in 2004 and 2009, Sonia Gandhi had some countrywide electoral appeal; but this was far less than that once enjoyed by her husband and mother-in-law. And, as the results of the UP election showed, her son enjoys even less appeal than his mother.

That the Nehru-Gandhis are necessary to win elections for the Congress is a myth. At the same time, the dominance of the family has damaged the party's ability to govern effectively. India is a young country whose future will be determined by those now under fifty years of age. The Congress has some capable young leaders at the Centre, but these men and women cannot be elevated to responsible positions in the Cabinet for fear that they will outshine Rahul Gandhi. In the states, where elections are increasingly Presidential, it would make good electoral sense for

the Congress to project a single leader before Assembly elections—this they cannot do, since it will mean undermining the patronage of the First Family. As a result, the party has lost a series of state elections it really should have won.

For its own long-term good, therefore, the Congress needs to think of life for the party beyond (and independent of) the Nehru-Gandhi family.

Coming next to the BJP, it may be that the RSS has become marginally less influential in the party. To be sure, Nitin Gadkari continues as BJP President largely because of the support of the RSS. The real change in the BJP over the past decade, however, has been the growing strength of their Chief Ministers. In the 1980s and 1990s, the most powerful leaders of the BJP operated out of Delhi—such as Atal Behari Vajpayee, Lal Krishna Advani, and Murali Manohar Joshi. Out of habit, and perhaps laziness, the Delhi media still focuses on BJP leaders based in the capital, such as Arun Jaitly and Sushma Swaraj. But come the next General Elections, the fate of the BJP will be decided not by them but by leaders based outside Delhi such as Shivraj Singh Chauhan, Raman Singh, and Narendra Modi.

How do these BJP Chief Ministers stand vis-à-vis the RSS? From what I can tell, Shivraj Singh Chauhan is strongly beholden to the Sangh, and Raman Singh slightly less so. Narendra Modi has sought to make himself independent of the RSS. However, their varying relations with the RSS do not mean that these leaders have come to believe in a more religiously inclusive view of India. For all three, Hinduism defines the essence of the nation. In this sense, although the RSS's influence on the BJP may have marginally declined, the party itself is still aligned more to hard than to soft Hindutva.

In the 2009 General Elections, the parliamentary left did very badly. Two years later they lost power in Assembly elections in Kerala and West Bengal. The latter defeat particularly has led to some introspection among the leaders of the party. After the rout in West Bengal Prakash Karat published a reflective piece in Caravan magazine that was remarkable on at least two counts: that a major Communist leader would admit to his party having made some mistakes (in this case, the failure to take the concerns of women and of environmental sustainability on board); and second, for its appearing in the kind of bourgeois publication that hard-core Communists are taught to scorn.

The Communists have within their ranks some of the more intelligent politicians in India; and also some of the less corrupt. One hopes that Karat's (admittedly partial) mea culpa has been followed within party circles with a serious rethink of the economic and political dogmas, derived from the experience of 19th and 20th century Europe, that have thus far guided the CPI(M) despite their irrelevance to the realities of 21st century India.

What, finally, of my fourth wish, that of a new national party altogether? When I offered it in 2009, Anna Hazare was confined to his village in Maharashtra, while corruption, although a problem that affected most Indians in everyday life, had not really become an issue of

nationwide debate and discussion. The media and CAG revelations on the spectrum and Commonwealth Games scams, and Hazare's own fasts in New Delhi in April and August 2011, have changed all this.

The movement born out of those fasts now says it will become a political party, and, in that capacity, fight some (it is not clear how many) seats in the next General Elections. I think this a necessary move, which will make the Congress and the BJP less complacent. However, to make any kind of impact, the leaders of this new party must move beyond making charges against individual politicians. A campaign founded exclusively on negativity cannot be sustainable.

To attract a wider constituency, the new party needs to offer some clear, pragmatic, policies that answer to the growing aspirations of the citizens for a dignified life free both of poverty and of fear. At the moment, however, the policies its leaders articulate veer towards a dangerous populism (such as the burning of electricity bills). The party needs to reach out to other groups such as Loksatta, which have made their own forays into the electoral arena. A Delhi-centered and individual-centered campaign will generate media attention in the short-term, without necessarily preparing the party for the hard realities of electoral politics—canvassing funds, building coalitions, campaigning door-to-door, offering voters more than a stream of abuse at (admittedly corrupt) politicians.

Altogether, my wish list looks marginally less unrealistic in October 2012 than when first offered in May 2009. The dynasty is on the back foot; the RSS is relatively quiescent; the left is introspective; and a new middle-class, cross-caste party is being born. To be sure, there is no promise of a new dawn, no prospect of a thoroughgoing redemption. But Indian democrats have learnt to set the bar low. And as Mahatma Gandhi once said, let us take it one step at a time.

(published in The Telegraph, 17th November 2012)

### **Appreciating Nehru**

The most admired human being on the planet may be a one-time boxer named Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. To spend three decades in prison fighting racial oppression, and then guide and oversee the peaceful transition to a multi-racial democracy, surely ranks as the greatest personal achievement since the end of the Second World War.

For the capaciousness of his vision and the generosity of his spirit, Nelson Mandela has sometimes been compared to Mahatma Gandhi. Like Gandhi, Mandela is both a reconciling figure and a universal figure, admired across the social spectrum in his own land and in other lands too. There are also odd personal details that bind them: Mandela was a friend of Gandhi's second son Manilal, Mandela and Gandhi were both lawyers, Mandela and Gandhi both lived in

Johannesburg, Mandela and Gandhi were both incarcerated in that city's Fort Prison. This prison now houses South Africa's Constitutional Court, on whose premises one can find permanent exhibits devoted to the life and example of Mandela and of Gandhi.

Mandela's comrade Ahmad Kathrada, his fellow prisoner in Robben Island, once asked why he admired Gandhi. Mandela answered: 'But Nehru was my hero'. To his biographer Anthony Sampson, Mandela explained his preference as follows: 'When a Maharaja tried to stop him he [Nehru] would push him aside. He was that type of man, and we liked him because his conduct indicated how we should treat our own oppressors. Whereas Gandhi had a spirit of steel, but nevertheless it was shown in a very gentle and smooth way, and he would rather suffer in humility than retaliate.'

In the 1940s, Mandela closely read Jawaharlal Nehru's books, including his autobiography. His speeches often quoted from Nehru's writings. A phrase that particularly resonated was 'there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere', used by Mandela in his first major political speech, made in September 1953. Decades later, the phrase found its way into Mandela's autobiography, whose Nehruvian title is 'Long Walk to Freedom'.

In 1980, Nelson Mandela was given the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. Since Mandela was in prison, his comrade Oliver Tambo—who had left South Africa to canvass support overseas, while travelling on an Indian passport—came to New Delhi to accept the award on his behalf. 'Nelson Mandela's captors may wish to ponder the fact', remarked Tambo in his speech, 'that Jawaharlal Nehru, who was no stranger to imprisonment and was in no way destroyed by it, served the world community, including the British, far better as a free man than as a political prisoner. Nelson Mandela's 18 years' imprisonment has in no way destroyed him, and will not.'

Jawaharlal Nehru appealed to Mandela and Tambo on account of his political views. As a socialist and modernist, Nehru's ideas were, to these South African radicals, more congenial than Gandhi's. But there was also a practical reason for their appreciation; the fact that, as Prime Minister of India, Nehru worked tirelessly to arraign the apartheid regime in the court of world opinion. Thus, as Tambo noted in his speech in New Delhi in 1980, 'if Mahatma Gandhi started and fought his heroic struggle in South Africa and India, Jawaharlal Nehru was to continue it in Asia, Africa and internationally. In 1946, India broke trade relations with South Africa—the first country to do so. Speaking at the Bandung Conference in April 1955, Jawaharlal Nehru declared: "There is nothing more terrible than the infinite tragedy of Africa in the past few hundred years."'

Shortly after the Bandung Conference, Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Soviet Union. When he spoke at Moscow University, in the audience was a young law student named Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev. Decades later, Gorbachev recalled the impact Nehru's speech made on him. 'Obviously, we [students] were still very far from understanding the principles of

democracy’, he wrote in his memoirs: ‘Yet, the simplified black-and-white picture of the world as presented by our propaganda was even then considered rather sceptically by the students. Jawaharlal Nehru’s visit to Moscow in June 1955 was an unexpected stimulus for me in this respect. ... This amazing man, his noble bearing, keen eyes and warm and disarming smile, made a deep impression on me’.

Thirty years after hearing Nehru speak in Moscow, Gorbachev helped bring about a peaceful end to the Cold War while permitting a transition to democracy in Eastern Europe. Unlike Soviet rulers in 1956, 1968 and 1979, he did not send troops into Soviet satellites whose people wanted an end to Stalinist one-party regimes. It appears the early exposure to Jawaharlal Nehru played at least some part in the reformist and reconciling politics of the mature Gorbachev.

I quote these appreciations for three reasons: because they are little-known, because Mandela and Gorbachev are both considerable figures, and because their admiration runs counter to the widespread disapprobation of Nehru among large sections of India’s youth, middle-class, and intelligentsia.

Greatly admired within India during his lifetime, Nehru witnessed a precipitous fall in his reputation after his death. This accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, when his ideas on the economy, on foreign affairs, and on social harmony all came under sharp attack. There was a vigorous campaign to free entrepreneurs from all forms of state control and regulation; a major, countrywide movement to redefine Indian secularism by making it more ‘Hindu’ in theory and practice; and a clamour from the media and business elite to abandon India’s non-alignment in favour of an ever closer relationship with the United States.

India has experimented now with twenty years of anti-Nehruvian policies in economics, social affairs, and foreign policy. These radical shifts have shown mixed results. Creative capitalism is being increasingly subordinated to crony capitalism; aggressive Hindutva has led to horrific riots and the loss of many lives; and the United States has not shown itself to be as willing to accommodate India’s interests as our votaries of a special relationship had hoped.

Among reflective Indians, there is a sense that these decades of Nehru-bashing have been somewhat counterproductive. It is true that Nehru was excessively suspicious of entrepreneurs, yet some form of state regulation is still required in a complex and unequal society. His ideas of religious and linguistic pluralism remain entirely relevant, or else India would become a Hindu Pakistan. And it suits India’s interests to have good relations with all major powers—China, the European Union, Russia, and the United States—rather than hitch its wagon to the US alone.

Nehru’s respect for democratic procedure, his inclusive social vision, and his independent foreign policy all remain relevant. Other aspects of his legacy are more problematic: these include his neglect of primary education, his lack of interest in military matters, and his scepticism of political decentralization. However, a balanced appreciation of Nehru’s legacy—its



positive and its negative aspects—is inhibited by the fact that the ruling Congress Party is controlled so closely by individuals related to him and who claim to speak in his name.

In a recent interview to *The Hindu*, Nayantara Sahgal pointed out that it was Indira Gandhi who created the ‘Nehru-Gandhi’ dynasty, not her father. This is absolutely true. In a book published in 1960, the editor Frank Moraes (by this time a sharp critic of the Prime Minister) wrote that ‘there is no question of Nehru’s attempting to create a dynasty of his own; it would be inconsistent with his character and career’. When Nehru died in 1964, another bitter critic, D. F. Karaka, nonetheless praised his resolve ‘not to indicate any preference with regard to his successor. This, [Nehru] maintained, was the privilege of those who were left behind. He himself was not concerned with that issue’.

Living outside India, insulated in their daily lives from the consequences of the deeds or misdeeds of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi, both Nelson Mandela and Mikhail Gorbachev could appreciate the sagacity and moral depth of Nehru’s political vision. We who live in India are however inhibited from doing so by the unfortunate accident whereby control of our most powerful political party has passed on to Nehru’s descendants.

[Ramachandra Guha’s new book, *Patriots and Partisans*, has just been published by Penguin/Allen Lane.]

(published in *The Hindu*, 13th November 2012)

### **Sonia’s Rise**

In Zareer Masani’s recent memoir of his parents, *And All is Said*, he quotes a letter written to him by his mother in 1968. ‘Yesterday we went to Mrs Pandit’s reception for Rajiv Gandhi and his wife’, wrote Shakuntala Masani, adding: ‘I can’t tell you how dim she is, and she comes from a working-class family. I really don’t know what he saw in her’.

When *And All is Said* was widely reviewed, when it was published, no reviewer seems to have picked up on this comment. Shakuntala Masani was the daughter of Sir J. P. Srivastava, once one of the most influential men in India, an industrialist with wide business interests and a member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council besides. Shakuntala’s husband, Minoo Masani, was a well educated Parsi from a family of successful professionals, who was himself a leading politician and writer. By upbringing and marriage Shakuntala Masani was a paid-up member of the Indian elite. Hence the condescending remarks about the working-class Italian whom Rajiv Gandhi had chosen as his wife.

The object of Mrs Masani’s contempt has, for some time now, been the most powerful person in India. How did she achieve that power, and what has she done with it? Sonia Gandhi’s rise in

politics has been at least as unlikely as Barack Obama's. Moving to Cambridge to learn English (but not at the university), she met and fell in love with Rajiv Gandhi. He brought her to India, where she lived a life of quiet domesticity, bringing up her children and attending to her husband. Through the turmoil of the 1970s, through the Emergency and its aftermath, Rajiv Gandhi stayed well out of politics. His stated ambition, at this stage, was to be promoted from flying Avros between Delhi and Lucknow to piloting Boeings on the more prestigious Delhi-Bombay run.

Indira Gandhi's political heir was her second son, Sanjay. In 1980 Sanjay died in a flying accident, and the mother pressed Rajiv to take his place. He was reluctant, his wife even more so. Sonia did not want Rajiv to join politics, and begged him not to take office as Prime Minister when his mother was assassinated in 1984. When he yielded to the clamour of his party colleagues, however, Sonia assumed the decorous, and decorative, role of a Prime Minister's wife.

When Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in 1991 the Congress asked his widow to lead the party. She declined, and went into seclusion. Politics had cost her beloved husband his life; she would have none of it. But after the Congress lost power in 1996 the chamchas began pleading with her once more. In 1998 she finally agreed to take charge as Congress President.

When Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister in 1966 the Socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia dismissed her as a gungi goodiya, a dumb doll. Sonia Gandhi was likewise taken less than seriously by her political opponents—who, like Shakuntala Masani, thought her dim, uneducated, a woman of no substance. Like her mother-in-law, Sonia rose to the challenge. She travelled around the country, putting life in the state units of the Congress. By her energy and determination she was able to bring her party to power in many states, and, in 2004, at the Centre.

Sonia Gandhi's achievement in rescuing the Congress from what appeared to be terminal decline was proof of her political skills, and of her personal courage. She had faced a barrage of abuse from her opponents, who—in a desperate appeal to the baser, xenophobic instincts of her fellow Indians—claimed that if the Congress was voted to power she would bring in 'Rome Raj'.

The Congress has now been in power for eight years. The Hindu right continues to target Sonia Gandhi as a foreigner. Her Italian birth is to them the prime reason why the UPA Government is illegitimate. There is a curious organization called the World Association of Hindu Scholars, composed largely of NRI and OCI academics who make sneering remarks about Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins, while simultaneously boasting about the Western degrees they have and the Western institutions they are affiliated with. A more weighty individual who persistently rakes up Mrs Gandhi's Italian and Catholic origins is the Gujarat Chief Minister, Mr Narendra Modi. When the Central Government announced that it would open up the retail trade to foreign investment, Mr Modi asked the Prime Minister how many Italian businessmen he intended to

please, how many Indian jobs he intended to give away to Italians. These were contemptible remarks, not least because there are other (and weightier) reservations that one may have about the coming in of Walmart into India.

I have never met Sonia Gandhi. But I have little doubt of her patriotism. The evidence suggests that she has accepted this country completely. The problem with Sonia Gandhi's politics is not her foreign birth, but her worship of her Indian family. She venerates Indira Gandhi, and is fanatically devoted to the memory of Rajiv Gandhi. Her politics and policies are determined chiefly by these sentiments, to the detriment of good governance and of the long-term future of the Congress Party itself.

Love of one's kin, that very Indian trait, has also persuaded Sonia Gandhi that her son Rahul is destined to become Prime Minister. When the first UPA Government assumed office in 2004, the allies, recognizing that the electorate was now mostly composed of people under thirty, gave the Cabinet posts allotted to them to younger leaders such as Ambumani Ramadoss and Dayanidhi Maran. The Congress, on the other hand, placed septuagenarians like Arjun Singh and Shivraj Patel in key portfolios.

Towards the end of the UPA's first term, a few young Congress leaders were made Ministers of State. They have continued in these junior positions for the past four years. It is overwhelmingly likely that this is because Sonia Gandhi fears that if any one of them was made Cabinet Minister, and performed well in that position, this would reflect badly on her son. Since Rahul Gandhi is not yet ready to become a Cabinet Minister no other young Congressman can become a Cabinet Minister either.

Then there is Sonia Gandhi's deep devotion to the memory of her dead husband. Congress leaders wishing to ingratiate themselves with their Leader know that the best way is to issue a stream of expensive advertisements on Rajiv Gandhi's birthday, name schemes after him, and invite Sonia Gandhi to inaugurate them.

It is at the inauguration of new bridges, airports and the like that Sonia Gandhi's political style becomes most apparent. Under this regime, these projects are often named after Rajiv Gandhi. Even if they are not, Sonia Gandhi will attribute the credit to him. The engineers who built the bridge or airport are never named and rarely thanked; rather, we are told that the bridge or airport is the fulfilment of Rajivji's technology-driven vision for India. I cannot recall whether Sonia Gandhi has ever attended a successful satellite launch organised by ISRO; but if she were, doubtless there too the nation will be told that it all happened because of Rajiv Gandhi.

This obsession has wounded the pride and self-respect of the ordinary Indians who design and execute such projects. And it has cost her party dearly too. Thus the Congress campaign for the Gujarat elections began with promise to women voters that they would get loans for houses if their party won. The scheme was named for Rajiv Gandhi; whereas a smarter (as well as more

honourable move) would have been to name it after Vallabhbhai Patel, a great Gujarati who was also a lifelong Congressmen.

Not her alleged lack of intelligence, nor her alleged lack of patriotism, but her excessive and often unreasoning devotion to her family is Sonia Gandhi's great flaw. She cannot allow that there may be Congressmen under fifty who are more capable and more intelligent than her son; or that any political leader other than Rajiv or Indira Gandhi ever did anything worthwhile for the nation.

(published in The Telegraph, 3rd November 2012)

### **Syrian Memories**

On the 30th of January, 2008, a group of scholars working on Gandhi convened in the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad. The organizers had in mind a day-long, informal, unstructured, conversation on what aspects of the Mahatma's legacy were still relevant. I had been invited, and would have gone, except that I had already accepted an invitation to visit Syria in the last week of January. Ahmedabad was a city I knew well and would go back to; but this was my first, and very likely last, chance to see Damascus.

Thus it was that, on the sixtieth anniversary of the Mahatma's martyrdom, while my friends were gathered on the banks of the Sabarmati in Ahmedabad, I was in the seminar room of the University of Damascus, speaking on Gandhi. I stressed three aspects of his thought in particular. I spoke, first, of his precocious environmentalism, his fear that the emulation by India (and China) of Western patterns of industrialization might, in his words, 'strip the world bare like locusts'. I spoke, next, of his remarkable religious pluralism, his lifelong endeavour to build trust and respect between different faith communities, culminating in his last, heroic, walks and fasts for communal harmony in Bengal and Delhi. I spoke, finally, of his techniques of non-violent resistance to unjust authority, which I argued were less harmful and more sustainable than the methods of armed struggle so common in the Middle East.

The audience was composed mostly of university teachers. The environmental argument they did not quite understand. The pluralism argument they understood and endorsed—Syria was one of the few states in the region where religious minorities were not victimized or persecuted. The non-violence argument they emphatically repudiated. How would their brother Palestinians win freedom from the Zionists except through armed resistance? I pointed out that the Palestinians had tried missiles and suicide bombers; all that brought them were more settlements and more army encampments. Had they tried non-violent satyagraha instead, they would have embarrassed the Israelis, and brought world opinion more firmly on their side. My hosts remained unpersuaded; Gandhian methods, they insisted, would not work against the hateful Zionists.

The next day I visited the Umayyad Mosque, one of the oldest and grandest in the world. I admired the pillars, the courtyard, the carpets and the turrets, and then went for a walk in the curving streets that lay behind the mosque. There was a warren of shops selling fresh fruit, vegetables, fish, and meat. Goods that were packed or tinned—such as rice, oil, soap, milk, coffee—were all, it seems, manufactured by local companies. There was not a single label that I could recognize. It was like being back in the India of the 1970s, when there were virtually no global brands. But there was, however, a certain non-Syrian presence in this old market behind the Umayyad Mosque. This was the Lebanese leader Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah, whose portrait was everywhere, presumably because his Hizbollah group had just waged a hit-and-run campaign against the Israeli Army. The one foreign ‘brand’ apparently liked and admired in the Syria of 2008 was of this Shia cleric.

After my walk through the market I turned back for the mosque. I approached it from the west; as I came near, I saw two bearded Orthodox Christian priests, dressed in black, with silver crucifixes across their chest. One of the priests was pointing out the high turrets to his colleague; he wore a look of wonder, admiring the antiquity and solidity of a structure built for and by a faith that was not his own. It was a magical, most revealing, sight; sadly, I had no camera to capture it.

After Damascus I proceeded to Aleppo. There I walked through the town’s souk, as magnificent, and as redolent with history and myth, as the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. A talk had been arranged here too; this time, the audience, which I was told was composed entirely of cadres and office-bearers of the ruling Ba’ath Party, heard me out in stony silence. Afterwards, I made my way back to the capital in an old Turkish train.

I did not write of my visit to Syria at the time. But when the civil war broke out there earlier this year, some memories came back to me. I remembered that on every wall, every turn, I had been met by the unflinching gaze of the country’s ruler, Bashar Assad. I had noticed the ban on free speech and intellectual discussion, but also, more curiously, a ban on motor-cycles and bicycles on the roads; when I asked about this, I was told that two-wheelers had been used in the past to mount attacks on officials and political rivals. Altogether, of all the countries I had visited this may have had the most hard-line, authoritarian, repressive, and paranoid regime.

The Assads, father and son, have been bad for Syria, for the Middle East, and for the world. But there is no saying that what will replace them will be any better. In a recent piece in the New York Times, the Indian writer Kapil Komireddi—who knows the region well—notes that the opposition to the Assad regime, who call themselves the ‘Free Syrian Army’, are dominantly Sunni, and increasingly Wahhabi. They have little time for Shias and even less time for Christians. Komireddi describes how Syria’s 2.3 million Christians, once safe under the Assads, are now being hounded out of their homes and killed. ‘The day begins here’, he writes, ‘with the call to prayer and ends with the roar of gunfire. Syria’s pluralistic society, which once rose above sectarian identity in a region often characterized by a homicidal assertion of religious belief, is

now faced with civil disintegration and ethnic cleansing.’ The calamities unfolding are architectural as well as human—already, parts of the grand Aleppo souk have gone up in flames in the fighting.

When I visited Damascus and Aleppo in 2008, George W. Bush was still President of the United States. Syria had been described by Bush’s regime as part of the ‘axis of evil’. Americans were forbidden from travelling there. As it happened, after I returned from Syria, my next visit overseas was to the United States. I had to give a talk at Madison, Wisconsin, for which it made sense to fly in via Chicago. The immigration officer at O’Hare airport took a long, hard look at my passport, then called me out of the queue and placed me in the hands of a superior officer. He, in turn, took me without a word of explanation into a room in the airport’s basement, directed me to a bench, and vanished. I knew at once what the problem was—namely, that the first stamp on my passport was Syrian, for that was the last visa I had acquired and the country I had most recently visited.

After an hour the officer returned, and asked what business I had in the United States. I told him the details of the conference I was to address, and also mentioned the titles of my books. He disappeared once more, I supposed to consult Google to confirm these details. I was eventually released, after three hours in the dark, this, in retrospect, a small price to pay for that unforgettable sight of admiring Christian priests outside the west wall of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.

(published in The Telegraph, 20th October 2012)

### **The State of My State**

I know that we may be speaking here of a race to the bottom, but I would still like to claim that the political culture of the state where I live, Karnataka, is more degraded than that of any other state of the Union. Consider these three, discrete, events that occurred in a single month, July 2012:

1. In early July, the Chief Minister of Karnataka, D. V. Sadananda Gowda, who belongs to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), was compelled to resign after a mere eleven months in office. Gowda had become Chief Minister after legal proceedings were initiated against his predecessor and party colleague, B. S. Yediyurappa, on charges of corruption. Yediyurappa was accused of transferring public land to his family members, and of abetting illegal mining in the district of Bellary, which had led to the loss of thousands of crores to the public exchequer and to massive environmental degradation. Sadananda Gowda had provided, by contrast, a relatively uncontroversial administration. However, Yediyurappa retained control over many BJP MLAs, and, after months of trying, was able to unseat Sadananda Gowda.

The move to dislodge the incumbent Chief Minister was preceded and followed by days of intense lobbying on sectarian lines, with leaders of different castes seeking the most important ministries for themselves. Meanwhile, in the background, the monsoon failed, and the farmers of the state faced a serious drought, facts that seemed to have escaped the attentions of the MLA's seeking high office. The amorality of the Karnataka BJP was justified by the party's National President, Nitin Gadkari, who added to his ample store of foot-in-the-mouth remarks by telling the press that while Sadananda Gowda had provided a scam-free administration, he had to be replaced because the party could only fight the next elections under a Lingayat leader.

2. In the middle of July, the former Prime Minister, H. D. Deve Gowda, held a convention of Muslim leaders in Bangalore. Ever since he demitted office in New Delhi in 1997, Mr Deve Gowda's single-minded focus has been on furthering his son H. D. Kumaraswamy's political career in Karnataka. Kumaraswamy had briefly been Chief Minister in a coalition between the Janata Dal (Secular) and the Bharatiya Janata Party. Now, seeking to disavow that alliance, and rebrand themselves as 'secular', father and son promised reservation in government jobs on religious lines if the JD (S) was re-elected to power.

Like poor Hindus and poor Christians, most poor Muslims seek English-language education and dignified employment in the modern (or private) sector. Offering a fixed share of government jobs is an tired, cynical and backward ploy that is certainly not in their best interests. And yet, in an astonishing display of competitive chauvinism, the day after Deve Gowda had 'promised' 4% of state jobs to Muslims, the Congress M. L. A., Roshan Baig, said his party would give them 6% reservation instead!

3. In the last week of July, the members of the State Legislative Assembly passed a unanimous resolution condemning a recent decision by UNESCO to declare the Western Ghats a 'World Heritage Site'. This is a designation eagerly sought after by member-nations of the UN. To secure this World Heritage status, countries around the world itemize the rare buildings, ancient cities, and endangered ecosystems within their boundaries. They commission reports on their significance by acknowledged experts, and lobby intensively with UNESCO. Only a handful of applications are approved every year.

To be designated a 'World Heritage Site' is enormously prestigious. It can help attract funds for upkeep and preservation, and generate revenue from tourism. The Western Ghats itself has a staggering range of plants and animal species, and some very spectacular landscapes. It is the source of the major rivers of peninsular India, and home to many sacred shrines. Its resources and reserves provide sustenance to hundreds of millions of Indians.

Remarkably, instead of welcoming the UNESCO's award, the legislators of Karnataka condemned it. This is most likely because once the Ghats are designated a World Heritage Site, it would become much harder for mining companies, real estate speculators, and dam builders to operate in these areas. Promoters of new projects would now have to do more than persuade

individual Ministers; rather, they would have to seek the consent of local communities as well as the approval of scientific experts.

The three cases I have highlighted all point to the short-sighted selfishness of politicians in Karnataka, this manifested in equal degree in all parties. The first two—a hunger for lucrative Ministries and the cynical appeasement of minorities—are a pan-Indian phenomenon. The last case is more singular, and hence more depressing. The Western Ghats are the source not only of mighty rivers, but also of great music, art, poetry, and literature. Some of the finest Kannada writers, such as K. V. Puttappa (Kuvempu), Kota Shivarama Karanth, U. R. Anantha Murty, and Purnachandra Tejaswi, were born and raised close to the Western Ghats. Their poems, plays, stories, and novels are suffused with descriptions of the landscape and of its residents (both human and animal).

To expose the Ghats to intensive exploitation by commercial interests is to encourage not merely environmental destruction, but the destruction of the basis of much of modern Kannada culture and civilization.

Alas, the events of July 2011 were entirely in character. I think no other state has, in recent years, witnessed a series of such incompetent and corrupt administrations. Whether led by Congress, BJP, or JD (S) Chief Ministers, the Government of Karnataka has, for the past three decades (at least), been largely indifferent, if not actively hostile, to considerations of economic development, social justice, environmental sustainability, or cultural creativity.

The last State Government in Karnataka that was in any meaningful way concerned with the welfare of its citizens was the Janata Party Government of 1983 to 1989. It had a focused agenda—of political decentralization and rural development—and some very capable Ministers, none more so than the socialist from Mysore, Abdul Nazir Sab. Nazir Sab worked hard to bring piped water to the remotest areas of the state. Touring the villages of northern Karnataka in 1984-5, I learnt that the Rural Development Minister was known affectionately as ‘Neer Sab’ (‘Neer’ being water in Kannada).

Nazir Sab’s commitment and courage inspired his colleagues to work harder and more sincerely than they might otherwise have done. However, in 1988 Nazir Sab was struck by cancer. It is said that when the Chief Minister visited him on his death-bed, Nazir Sab urged him to complete the peoples’ housing schemes he had initiated. Unfortunately, after the socialist stalwart’s death in October 1988, the Janata Government lost its bearings, and fell shortly afterwards.

In view of the current contempt of Karnataka legislators for the ecology of the Western Ghats, it may also be worth recalling that the Janata Government of the 1980s showed a certain commitment to sustainable development. Through the 1980s, the State’s Department of Environment produced an excellent annual survey, edited by the distinguished botanist Cecil J. Saldanha, and to which Karnataka’s top scientists and social scientists contributed. The



Government's schemes for rural development and environmental management were continually scrutinized by citizens' groups, and by influential writer-activists such as Shivarama Karanth.

Among the colleagues of Nazir Sab in the Janata Government of the 1980s were S. R. Bommai and H. D. Deve Gowda. Their sons are active and influential in Karnataka politics today. But it is doubtful if they or their contemporaries know or care for 'Neer' Sab's legacy. Across party lines, the legislators and Ministers of Karnataka now tend to privilege the interests of mining and real estate lobbies above the concerns of the ordinary citizens of the state.

(published in The Telegraph, 4th August 2012)

### **The Indian Road To Unsustainability**

In June 1992, Dr Manmohan Singh, then Finance Minister in the Government of India, delivered the Foundation Day Address of the Society for Promotion of Wastelands Development (SPWD). He spoke on the topic, 'Environment and the New Economic Policies'. In his talk, Dr Singh urged 'objective standards industry-wise for safeguarding the environment, asking industry to certify compliance with these standards, institution of an effective system of verification and industry audit and heavy penalties for non-compliance with approved environmental standards and norms'.

Back in 1992, Dr Singh expressed the hope that the new economic policies, by ending bureaucratic regulation of economic activities, would 'set free a substantial amount of scarce administrative resources which can then be deployed in nation-building activities like rural development, education, health and environmental protection'. The Finance Minister ended his lecture by saying that 'I for one am convinced that the new economic policies introduced since July 1991 will provide a powerful stimulus to an accelerated drive both for poverty reduction and the protection of our environment'.

There is an vigorous debate on the impact of economic liberalization on poverty reduction. I am not qualified to intervene in this debate, but as a long-time student of environmental issues, I can confidently state that in this latter respect Dr Manmohan Singh's hope has been falsified. The past two decades have seen a systematic assault on our lands, forests, rivers, and atmosphere, whereby new industries, mines, and townships have been granted clearances without any thought for our long-term future as a country and a civilization.

In the 1980s—the decade before Dr Singh addressed the SPWD—the environmental movement had forced the Government to introduce a series of important ameliorative measures. Pressures from popular agitations such as the Chipko Andolan had made the nation's forest policies more sensitive to local communities and to ecological diversity. A movement led by a professor-priest in Banaras had committed the Government to a Ganga Action Plan, which aimed to clean the

polluted holy river as a prelude to the restoration of other rivers and water-bodies. The scientific and social critiques of large hydel projects had compelled a closer look at decentralized and non-destructive alternatives for water conservation and irrigation.

When speaking of environmental issues, it is important to recognize that in a densely populated country like India, these have both an ecological as well as human dimension. Programmes to clear-cut natural forests and replace them with exotic species deplete the soil even as they deprive peasants of access to fuel, fodder and artisanal raw material. Mining projects, if not properly regulated or carried out with state-of-the-art technologies, ravage hillsides and pollute rivers used by villagers downstream. In this sense, in India environmental protection or conservation is not a luxury—as it might be in rich, underpopulated countries—but the very basis of human (and national) survival.

This was the key insight of the Indian environmental movement of the 1970s and 1980s, which informed both scientific research as well as public policy. After economic liberalization, however, environmental safeguards have been systematically dismantled. The Ministry of Environment and Forests has cleared destructive projects with abandon. Penalties on errant industries are virtually never enforced. Although by law every new project has to have an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), these, as the then Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh candidly admitted in March 2011, are a ‘bit of a joke’, since ‘under the system we have today, the person who is putting up the project prepares the report’.

As a consequence, the natural environment has steadily deteriorated over the past twenty years. Levels of air pollution in our cities have increased. More rivers are dead or dying owing to the influx of untreated waste. Our forests remain under threat. The chemical contamination of the soil continues unabated.

This undermining of India’s natural life-support systems is ignored, indeed at times encouraged, by State and Central Governments of all ideologies and parties. Consider the official hostility to the comprehensive, fact-filled and carefully written report on the Western Ghats prepared by a team of experts led by the world-famous ecologist Madhav Gadgil. The Ghats are a natural treasure more precious even than the Himalaya. Their forests, waters, and soils nourish the livelihoods of several hundred million Indians.

The Gadgil report urges a judicious balance of development and conservation, whereby local communities as well as scientific experts are consulted on mining, tourism, and energy generation projects. The report is in the spirit of the democracy and social equality professed by the Constitution. However, its recommendations do not sit easily with those who would auction our natural resources to the highest bidder or the bidder with the most helpful political connections. Chief Ministers of States have condemned the report without reading it. The Union Minister of the Environment has refused to meet the distinguished authors of a report her own Ministry commissioned. Meanwhile, Madhav Gadgil and his equally esteemed colleague, M. S.

Swaminathan, have been dropped from the National Advisory Council. This has further impoverished that body, since Professors Gadgil and Swaminathan are not 'jholawalas' but top-class scientists, advocating policies based not on ideology but on logical reasoning and empirical evidence.

Dr Manmohan Singh's prediction of 1992, that the environmental situation would improve after liberalization, has unfortunately not come to pass. Natural systems have continued to decline, while social conflicts have increased, as developers unchecked by the state or the law aggressively displace local farmers, herders, and fisherfolk. Let me end with a prediction of my own. If the Gadgil report is junked, the Western Ghats will, in the years to come, witness its own Singurs, Nandigram, Niyamgiris, and Dantewadas.

(published in the Hindustan Times, 24th July 2012)

### **Sycophants Saffron And White**

They say a writer is known by the enemies he makes. Earlier this week, I was alerted to an attack on me posted on the website of the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Mr Narendra Modi. 'Ramachandra Guha's impotent anger', claimed Mr Modi's website,

'is typical of a snobbish but vacuous intellectual who simply cannot tolerate a person from humble background attaining greatness by the dint of his own hard work, learning and persistence. But Ramachandra Guha, after more than 40 years of Dynasty history writing remains where he is while Narendra Modi has continues to scale up. Which is why Modi can speak about and implement well-considered policies on topics as diverse as governance, economy, environment, industry, infrastructure, solar energy, IT, and tourism while Guha is simply unable to look beyond the walls of 10 Janpath. (<http://www.narendramodi.in/the-will-of-the-people-always-triumphs/> accessed 9th July 2012).'

This paragraph contains a series of innuendos, half-truths, and outright falsehoods. To begin with the most elementary error, my CV as it appears on Mr Modi's website exaggerates my professional longevity. I have been a historian for a mere twenty-five years, and a political historian for only the last ten of those years.

More importantly, Mr Modi's website names as my friends people I have not been in the same room with, and who, if they were to read my writings, would very likely consider me their enemy. I have never entered 10 Janpath, nor met any of its occupants. On the other hand, in books and essays written over the years, I have often criticized the public role of the Congress Party's First Family. I have deplored the conversion by Indira Gandhi of a countrywide party with vigorous state and district units into an extension of herself. I have written of how the first Mrs Gandhi destroyed public institutions by encouraging politicians to appoint officials on the

basis of personal loyalty rather than competence or integrity. I have turned a critical lens on Rajiv Gandhi's Prime Ministership as well, showing how his pandering to Muslim and Hindu chauvinists helped catalyze two decades of civil conflict.

More recently, I have written of how the second Mrs Gandhi has extended the culture of sycophancy in party and Government, and of how she has encouraged large sums of public money to be spent (or wasted) on advertisements and memorials to Rajiv and Indira Gandhi.

I have, in the past decade, written many newspaper columns detailing the damaging effects on politics and public life of the culture of sycophancy and dynastic rule introduced by Indira Gandhi and carried on by her successors. In the same period, I have also written several articles on Mr Narendra Modi's handling (or mishandling) of the 2002 riots and their aftermath, as well as one column on an architectural monstrosity that Mr Modi has commissioned in Mahatma Gandhi's name.

Mr Modi's website managers may claim not to know of my correct attitude to the Congress Party's First Family. On the other hand, the First Family's courtiers know it well, and have duly conveyed it to their masters. In 2008 and 2009, I was involved in a campaign to restore the character of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), a superb, professionally run repository of manuscripts and old records, at that time in the control of a cabal that disregarded both institutional norms and intellectual work. To protect itself, the cabal that then ran the NMML promoted the glorification of the First Family, plastering photographs and sayings of Jawaharlal and Indira all over the campus and turning over the Library's seminar room to Rahul Gandhi and his Youth Congress.

The campaign I was part of—and in which India's finest historians, sociologists, and political scientists participated—sought to free the NMML from self-serving sycophants and return it to the control of professional and independent-minded historians. Seeking to undermine the campaign, the cabal that then ran the NMML sent the Prime Minister and his Party President an account of how, in my book *India after Gandhi*, I had documented the striking parallels between the pogrom against Sikhs in Delhi in 1984 and that against Muslims in Gujarat in 2002. I had written of how the mobs in both cases were directed by ruling party politicians, and how the person in charge of the administration (Rajiv Gandhi and Narendra Modi respectively) had each issued graceless statements justifying the violence. Then I added: 'The final similarity is the most telling, as well as perhaps the most depressing. Both parties, and leaders, reaped electoral rewards from the violence they had legitimized and overseen'.

Calling attention to these remarks, the Congress sycophants wrote to Dr Singh and Mrs Gandhi: 'Rajiv Gandhi is thus accused [by Guha] of having not only legitimized the violence [by his graceless statement] but "overseen" it, meaning "supervising" it. Even the worst critics of Rajiv Gandhi have never made this accusation ...'

Those who wrote the letter knew that there if there is one politician Sonia Gandhi dislikes, it is Narendra Modi. As a historian I would stand by every word I wrote, but from the point of view of the Family's courtiers, to compare their beloved and adored Rajivji with Mr Modi was to place oneself beyond the pale altogether.

Truth be told, readers of this column are probably weary of my regular criticisms of the First Family of the Congress Party. Why then would Mr Modi's website managers so grossly misrepresent my views and affiliations in this regard? Here are three possible reasons:

First, innuendo and falsehood are rife on the Web, where there are no self-regulating mechanisms to check for factual errors whether wilful or accidental;

Second, extremist ideologues cannot think in other than black-and-white. They believe that critics of their ideology or political practice must necessarily be accomplices or mouthpieces of their political adversaries. Since I have consistently stood against Hindutva and religious sectarianism, and on occasion found fault with Mr Modi's policies as well, acolytes of the Gujarat Chief Minister assume that I am a camp follower of the Congress Party and of its current leadership;

Third, although I have reservations about the political styles of Indira, Rajiv, and Sonia Gandhi, I am, on the whole, an admirer of Jawaharlal Nehru. Historians must rigorously separate Nehru's legacy from that of his descendants—not least because Nehru himself had no hope or desire that his daughter would succeed him as Prime Minister. What we call the 'Dynasty' is entirely Indira Gandhi's doing. This distinction is glossed over by the Hindutvawadis, who assume that a writer who has sometimes written in praise of Nehru must be a habitual visitor to 10, Janpath.

In my view, the greatest Indians of the twentieth century were Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, followed, at a short distance, by a quintet whose members were Nehru, B. R. Ambedkar, Vallabhbhai Patel, C. Rajagopalachari, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. These visionaries laid the foundations of a multi-party political system, promoted linguistic and religious pluralism, fought caste and gender hierarchies, and in other ways helped make India's transition to nationhood and democracy somewhat less painful and bloody than it would otherwise have been.

The distance between Jawaharlal Nehru and Sonia Gandhi is colossal. So is the distance between Mahatma Gandhi and Narendra Modi. By making these points in print I have made myself unpopular with the courtiers of the Congress Party President and, it now appears, with the courtiers of the Gujarat Chief Minister as well.

{published in The Telegraph, 14th July 2012)

## **The Two Bengals**

Of the countries close to or bordering India, I have been once to China and Afghanistan, twice to Sri Lanka and Nepal, and three times to Pakistan. I have declined several invitations to visit Bhutan, but were anyone to invite me to Bangladesh or Burma I would accept without hesitation. I am told Bhutan is pretty—very pretty—and were I a botanist, Buddhist, or birdwatcher I would surely want to go there. But given my interests, I am attracted more to Burma and to Bangladesh, which are much larger, far more complex in sociological terms, and with tumultuous recent histories besides.

The birth of an independent Bangladesh was met with skepticism by Western observers. It was the archetypal basket case, incapable of feeding itself. Sympathetic do-gooders like Joan Baez sang songs to get their richer compatriots to gift money and supplies to the poor starving Bengalis. Others were more hard-headed. The well-known American biologist, Garrett Hardin, wrote that it was futile to send rice to a people incapable of anything other than procreation. In his view the Bangladeshis should have been left to starve to death.

For the first decade, and more, of its existence, Bangladesh was seen as proof of the Malthusian dictum that in the absence of social organization and technological innovation, population would soon outstrip food supply, leading to mass famine. When lectured to on their breeding habits in the United Nations, Bangladeshi diplomats answered that an American child consumed seventy times as much as a child born in Dhaka or Khulna. One diplomat was more cheeky—claiming, on the basis of a visit to a New York supermarket stocking rows upon rows of pet food, that the birth of one American dog or cat had a greater impact on the global environment than the birth of one Bangladeshi child.

Soon Bangladeshi diplomats had other, and more uncomfortable, questions to answer. There were a series of military coups, and a surge in Islamic fundamentalism. The popular image of the country was that it was over-populated, and run by generals hand-in-glove with mullahs. Slowly, however, perceptions began to change. There were no famines; in fact, rice production grew steadily within the country. The industrial sector also progressed, with Bangladesh emerging as a major exporter of textiles. The generals went back to their barracks, and civilian governments took their place. As the commonsense of Bengali Islam re-asserted itself, the jihadis also retreated.

In a fine recent book, the British anthropologist David Lewis shows that those early predictions of doom and gloom greatly underestimated the resilience and dynamism of Bangladeshi society. Defying the odds—and the cynics—the country's farmers, workers, entrepreneurs, and professionals have made a modest success of their country. Once written off as a basket case, Bangladesh is now spoken of as a basket of innovation, with regard to, among other things, micro-credit.

As David Lewis demonstrates, given its unpropitious beginnings and violent interruptions (as in assassinations and coups), the fact that Bangladesh has survived forty testing years, and remains some kind of democracy, is a notable achievement. Lewis further points out that with regard to most economic and social indicators, Bangladesh is doing better than Pakistan, the country of which it was once the eastern wing. West Pakistanis looked down on the Bengalis, whom they considered effete and lazy. But from today's vantage point it is the former East Pakistanis who come out much better. Pakistan is riven by civil conflict, religious violence, economic stagnation, and the oppression of women. On the other hand, Bangladesh has witnessed steady economic growth, the defeat of religious extremism, and an ever greater participation of women in the work force and in the public sphere more generally.

To be sure, whereas Bangladesh has done reasonably well in recent years, deficiencies remain. There is still an excessively Islamic cast to its politics, with Hindus and Buddhists not always secure of their rights of citizenship. The army may yet come out of the barracks. Corruption is rife. And the coastal districts are vulnerable to climate change.

These caveats notwithstanding, one cannot but be impressed with the steady progress made by Bangladeshi society. David Lewis compares it favourably to Pakistan. I am tempted, on the basis of the evidence in his book, to make another, and perhaps even more telling, comparison. This is with the Indian state of Paschim Banga. West Bengal and East Bengal share a common ecology, a common language, and a common cultural and historical heritage. They went their separate ways in 1947, with the former becoming a part of India, the latter a part of Pakistan.

It appears that in at least four respects Bangladesh is doing significantly better than West Bengal. First, the atmosphere is more conducive to welfare-oriented civil society organizations. Groups such as BRAC, Grameen Bank and Gonoshastya Kendra have done outstanding work in providing credit, health care, and education to poor peasants and slum dwellers. These groups have no real analogues in West Bengal, where civil society groups face considerable hostility from the state and from political parties.

Second, there is a more extensive, and apparently more reliable, network of roads and waterways. Roads and bridges allow peasants to get their produce to the market, get their children to school, and obtain medicines to treat the sick and elderly. This has been recognized by Nitish Kumar in Bihar, and by successive Governments in Bangladesh. But the roads in West Bengal continue to be in a pathetic condition.

The third and fourth contrasts are connected. There are many more women working in the modern manufacturing sector in Bangladesh, which is linked to the fact that the government's economic policy is outward-looking and export-oriented. In West Bengal, on the other hand, the economic outlook has been insular, hostile to entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship.

As I know well from my years in Kolkata, the bhadrak of that city have long held feelings of condescension, if not contempt, for their compatriots in the east. The prejudices of caste and

religion feed into this: upper-caste Bengali Hindus think of themselves as superior to low-caste Muslim converts. The sense of cultural superiority is enhanced by what Kolkata is supposed to be—a great international city, a centre of scientific and artistic creativity, the place that inspired or nurtured Ray, Tagore, Amartya Sen, Jagdish Bose (and so many others). Dhaka, on the other hand, is said to be a provincial dump.

The contempt for the Bangaal among the bhadralok is matched by their contempt for the Bihari, who are often seen as fit for not much more than pulling rickshaws. But it may now be the case that the patronizers have something to learn from the patronized. For, in recent years, the political elites of Bihar and Bangladesh have been far more focused on economic growth and social well-being than the nostalgic and self-regarding elites of West Bengal.

The problems with West Bengal are well known—a dysfunctional health system, badly run (and over-politicized) schools and colleges, lack of good roads (and oftentimes of any roads at all), inability to attract investment, the absence of a work ethic among office-goers and factory employees. To learn how to address these problems, Ministers in the Paschim Banga Government would do well to travel through Bihar, or read David Lewis's book on Bangladesh—or preferably both. Then, perhaps, what Dhaka and Patna are doing today, Kolkata may yet come to do tomorrow.

(published in The Telegraph, 30th June 2012)

### **Dams And The Damned**

In September 2010, a large public meeting was held in Guwahati to discuss the impact of large hydroelectric projects in the North-east. In attendance was Jairam Ramesh, then the Minister of Environment and Forests in the Government of India. Ramesh heard that the people of Assam were worried that the hundred and more dams being planned in Arunachal Pradesh would reduce water flows, increase the chance of floods, and deplete fish stocks downstream. Representatives from Arunachal had their own concerns—the dams to be built in their state, they said, would displace local communities, submerge valuable forests, and be exposed to the risk of earthquakes. Activists told the Minister that the Central Government seemed set on making the people of Arunachal a pawn in the race between India and China.

After the meeting, the Environment Minister wrote to the Prime Minister that, in his view, 'some of the concerns that were expressed [at the Guwahati meeting] cannot be dismissed lightly. They must be taken on board and every effort made to engage different sections of society in Assam particularly and in other North-Eastern states as well. Right now the feeling ... appears to be that "mainland India" is exploiting the North-East hydel resources for its benefit, while the costs of this exploitation will be borne by the people of [the] North-East'.



Jairam Ramesh's judicious, sensible, recommendations attracted hysterical condemnation from a New Delhi newspaper wedded to the doctrine of 'growth at all costs'. The newspaper ran an editorial accusing India's excellent and extremely well-qualified Environment Minister of 'gadding about looking for more fashionable causes to sponsor.' It charged him with seeking to 'destabilize an entire region's development'.

A few days later, the newspaper ran another editorial demanding quick clearance of all dam projects in Arunachal Pradesh. It claimed the 'environment ministry has been careless and unwise in its approach to the various relatively small (sic) projects that have been planned for Arunachal in an attempt to increase the region's prosperity and integration into the rest of the economy'. Warming to the theme, the editorial insinuated that by keeping Arunachal 'backward', Ramesh was merely playing into the hands of the Chinese.

In fact, it was the dams, rather than their stoppage, that threatened to destabilize the region. Of all states in the North-east, only Arunachal Pradesh has not yet had an insurgency, in part because of sensible policies designed by the anthropologist Verrier Elwin in the 1950s and 1960s, which protected tribal rights in land and forests and kept missionaries (of all faiths) out of the state. Ramesh's own proposals made sound economic, social and political sense. The dams would largely benefit cities in the plains, while displacing local farmers, herders, and fisherfolk. Besides, the Eastern Himalaya have India's richest reserves of biodiversity; they are also peculiarly earthquake-prone. Nature, as well as culture, mandated that proposals to build large dams be treated cautiously. Already there was growing popular discontent on the issue. Transparent public hearings were urgently called for, so that the people of Arunachal, rather than some excessively business-friendly newspaper in New Delhi, could decide for themselves what would best bring them 'prosperity' and 'integration'.

Two recent reports, by correspondents very knowledgeable about the north-east, bear witness to the wisdom of Ramesh's warnings. Writing in *The Hindu* last month, Sushanta Talukdar notes that 'the Centre has identified the ecologically fragile [state of] Arunachal Pradesh as the powerhouse of the country'. 133 dam projects have been allotted to the state so far, of which 125 are in the private sector. The annual report for 2011-12 of the Ministry of Power has proposed that 57,672 Megawatts of power be generated in the North-east, of which 46,977 are to be generated in Arunachal alone. The social and environmental dislocations this will cause had, the correspondent reported, led to deep resentment among the Arunachalis. Thus a group called Forum for Siang Dialogue was opposing dams on the hauntingly beautiful Siang River. 'Student and youth organisations of the State', wrote Talukdar, 'have been alleging that public hearings were conducted without proper information to people and in the presence of the police and paramilitary forces'.

Also in May 2012, *Mint* newspaper carried an article by Sudeep Chakravarti on the dangers posed by unregulated dam building in Arunachal Pradesh. A reporter who knows the region well, Chakravarti grimly observed that Arunachal 'has imported the worst practices from mainland

India in land allocation for projects, and misuse of the doctrine of eminent domain. A recent case: In mid-April, the government violently dispersed protesters who had gathered to dissent against the private sector-led 2,700 MW Lower Siang Hydro Electric Project. Worse will follow.' It has; a report in The Telegraph in early June noted that work on the 2000 MW Lower Subansiri Project has stalled completely owing to local opposition to its construction.

Twenty years, in our book *This Fissured Land*, Madhav Gadgil and I pointed out that, unlike Europe and North America at a comparable stage of their industrialization, India did not have access to colonies which she could conquer or settle. This should have entailed a more prudent, responsible, and efficient use of the country's natural endowment. Tragically, since economic liberalization we have instead adopted a more profligate pattern of resource use. The new legal safeguards put in place in the 1980s as a consequence of the environmental movement have been ignored or abandoned. Programmes for water conservation, sustainable energy, and the like, have been shelved or relegated to the margins. There is an enchantment with American lifestyles, that is to say, with lifestyles that rest on an continuously increasing demand for natural resources. Values of simplicity and frugality, espoused by great Indians such as the Buddha and Gandhi, and once respected, though perhaps never willingly followed except by a minority, have now completely vanished. The ever louder clamour is for 'Dil Mange More'.

To meet the needs of the corporate sector and the consuming classes, the Government has encouraged a new scramble for resources in the tribal areas of central India and in the North-east. These regions are on their way to becoming our 'internal colonies', as a wave of mining and hydroelectric schemes undermine local ecologies, and disrupt and displace local communities, creating widespread discontent. A state such as Orissa had virtually no Naxalites fifteen years ago; however, as a consequence of the handing over of tribal lands to mining companies, left-wing insurgents now have a significant presence in half-a-dozen districts. Meanwhile, the rash of dam-building in the North-east is provoking a further wave of discontent among the people of that likewise neglected, exploited, region.

Those wedded to the doctrine of growth-at-all-costs have posited a false opposition between environment and development. In truth, there are multiple paths to increasing economic growth and/or decreasing poverty. The path of development currently being followed in India is short-sighted, destructive, and socially polarizing. On the other hand, as experts such as the late A. K. N. Reddy (see [www.amulya-reddy.org.in](http://www.amulya-reddy.org.in)) and the Prayas Group (see [www.prayaspune.org](http://www.prayaspune.org)) have demonstrated, large dams are not the only or best way of meeting our energy needs. Far more appropriate to Indian conditions is a demand-side approach that uses less energy-intensive technologies and minimizes transmission losses. Smaller, run-of-the river schemes can be economically viable, environmentally sustainable, and socially inclusive alternatives to mega-projects. That these alternatives are not taken more seriously is due only to the influence of the contractor-promoter-politician nexus on decision-making. It is a sign of far removed newspaper editors in New Delhi are from the rest of the country that, rather than expose these interests, they seek to endorse or apologize for them. (published in The Telegraph, 16th June 2012)

## **The Greatest Living Gandhian**

When Dr Manmohan Singh went to call on Aung San Suu Kyi earlier this week, I wonder whether the great Burmese lady recalled her first encounter with India and Indians. In the 1950s, as a young teenager, she moved to Delhi with her mother, who had been appointed Burma's Ambassador to India. The years she spent in our country were absolutely formative to her intellectual (and moral) evolution. As Peter Popham writes in his recent *The Lady and the Peacock: The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi*: 'Intellectually, moving to India proved to be a crucial step for Suu. In the Indian capital she discovered at first hand what a backwater she had been born and raised in, and began to learn how a great civilisation, which had been under the thumb of the imperialists far longer than Burma, had not lost its soul in the process, but rather had discovered new modes of feeling and expression that were a creative blend of Indian tradition and the modernity the British brought with them.'

After taking her first degree at Delhi University, Suu Kyi moved to Oxford for further studies. There she was courted by some very articulate Indians, but in the end settled on a quiet and contemplative Englishman named Michael Aris. Aris was a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, devoted to his studies, and to his wife. By all accounts this was a very happy marriage, albeit one where the division of gender roles was utterly conventional. Suu was the housewife and homemaker, Michael the scholar and star. They lived in Oxford, raising two boys, he spending the days in the library, she shopping and cleaning and cooking.

In the 1970s, Michael Aris was invited to the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS) in Shimla. Scouring the Institute's library, Suu Kyi renewed her interest in Indian nationalism. In a monograph she wrote for the IIAS, she praised Rammohan Roy, who had 'set the tone for the Indian Renaissance'. Later nationalists ensured that 'social, religious and political aspects of reform should move together.' Of Indian thinkers, Suu Kyi admired Rabindranath Tagore (whose poems and songs she still quotes), and, most of all, Gandhi, who reconciled tradition and modernity in a manner she found most appealing. 'In spite of his deeply ingrained Hinduism', she remarked, 'Gandhi's intellectual flexibility made him accept those elements of western thought which fitted into the ethical and social scheme he considered desirable.'

When Suu and Michael were courting, she wrote him a letter in which she said that, if they married, 'I only ask one thing, that should my people need me, you would help me do my duty by them.' The lines were prophetic. In 1988, Suu Kyi visited Rangoon to see her ailing mother. While she was there, a popular uprising broke out against the military regime. As the daughter of the great nationalist hero Aung San, she was drawn into the struggle, and soon became its symbol and rallying-point. Her subsequent career is well-known: how she led her newly formed party to a landslide victory in the elections of 1990, how instead of honouring that verdict the Generals put her under arrest, how for the next twenty years she was separated from her husband and sons, while battling a brutal regime with such tenacious courage that she was compared to Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

A close friend of hers once remarked that ‘Gandhi is Suu Kyi’s role model and hero.’ In his book, Popham picks up on this point, comparing his subject repeatedly with the Mahatma. Her tours through the Burmese countryside were inspired by Gandhi’s travels through India after his return from South Africa. Popham says of her opposition to armed resistance that ‘the moral advantage Suu possessed, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King in other times and places, was that she and her followers would never meet violence with violence.’

The comparison is natural, not forced. As I see it, there are at least six respects in which Suu Kyi’s career parallels that of the Mahatma: (1) A leavening of politics with morality, which comes in both cases from a religious faith which is devout without being dogmatic; (2) A commitment to non-violence in word and in deed; (3) A willingness to reach out to one’s rivals and opponents; (4) An openness to ideas and innovations from other cultures; (5) An utter fearlessness, with death holding no dangers for them; (6) Great personal charm, a feature of which is a sense of humour.

However, while Aung San Suu Kyi can certainly be compared to Gandhi, she cannot (as she perhaps would be the first to acknowledge) be equated to him. Gandhi came first, crafting the techniques of non-violent resistance of which Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, and Aung San Suu Kyi have been such outstanding exemplars. Besides, Gandhi’s range of interests (and obsessions) was far greater.

India is much larger than Burma, and much more diverse in linguistic and religious terms. Gandhi lived and died for Hindu-Muslim harmony, but we know little of how Suu Kyi intends to stem Buddhist chauvinism in Myanmar by giving greater respect to Muslims, tribals and other minorities. India is a far more hierarchical society than Myanmar; so can be no real parallel in Suu Kyi’s life to Gandhi’s lifelong struggle against untouchability. And Gandhi was also an precocious environmentalist.

That said, Suu Kyi is far closer to Gandhi, and a much better Gandhian, than any Indian now living. Indians who currently claim to speak in Gandhi’s name include the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh (whose inaugural speech in May 2004 committed his Government to Gandhi’s talisman to think always of the poorest of the poor); Sonia Gandhi, whose connection to the Mahatma is as President of a Party he built and to which he owed a life-long allegiance; and Anna Hazare, whose cheerleaders regularly and repeatedly claim to be the next Gandhi.

Compared to this Burmese heroine, these are all nakli Gandhians. As one colleague in the democracy movement recalled, Suu Kyi’s skill as a leader is that ‘she never takes the upper hand, she never uses her family background to dominate.’ One wishes one could say the same thing about Sonia Gandhi. Again, Suu Kyi’s quiet, understated, personality, her calm dignity, her expansive intellectual vision—these are in sharp contrast to the spitefulness of tone, the love of publicity, the limited horizons, of Anna Hazare. And her steely courage, her decisiveness in

times of crisis, stand at the other extreme from the timidity and pusillanimity of the Indian Prime Minister.

In terms of position, there was a profound asymmetry between the two who shook hands this past Tuesday. One was the Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy, the other a powerless Member of Parliament in a mid-sized country which is erratically and episodically emerging from authoritarian rule. In terms of moral standing, of course, the asymmetry runs in the reverse direction. It is probably too much to hope that by shaking his hand and dignifying him with an appointment, Suu Kyu might have transferred a small amount of courage to her visitor.

2nd June 2012

### **Smash-And-Grab Crony League**

I live in Bangalore, down the road from the Karnataka State Cricket Association. I am a member of the KSCA, which means that I can watch all the matches played in its stadium for free, and from a comfortable seat next to the pavilion. I exercise the privilege always during a Test match, often during a one-day international, and sometimes during a Ranji Trophy match. However, I have not yet watched an IPL game played at the KSCA, nor do I intend to in the future.

My original reasons for boycotting the Indian Premier League were aesthetic. 20-20 lacks the subtlety of the longer form; no one can build an innings, no one bowl a probing spell. I didn't much care either for the way the game was packaged, while the man who owned the local Bangalore team was—as seen by someone whose day job is studying the legacy of Ambedkar, Gandhi, Nehru—somewhat on the loud side.

The sting operation involving some (fringe) IPL players and the fight between Shah Rukh Khan and the Mumbai Cricket Association both seem to confirm these aesthetic reservations. But in fact the problem with the IPL goes far beyond petty corruption and boorish celebrities. The Indian Premier League is not just bad for me, but bad for Indian capitalism, bad for Indian democracy, and bad for Indian cricket.

Let me defend these claims. When the Indian economy was liberalized, in 1991, it unleashed the long-suppressed energies of the entrepreneurial class. Sectors such as software and pharmaceuticals, that depended chiefly on innovation and knowledge, prospered. This was capitalism at its most creative; generating incomes and jobs, satisfying consumer tastes, and also spawning a new wave of philanthropy.

More recently, however, some less appealing sides of capitalism have manifested themselves. The state retains control of three key resources—land, minerals, and the airwaves. These resources have become enormously valuable with the expansion of the economy, prompting

sweetheart deals between individual politicians and individual entrepreneurs, whereby land, minerals, or spectrum are transferred at much less than market cost, and for a (quite large) consideration. Creative capitalism has increasingly given way to crony capitalism, with dire consequences for society, for the environment, and for public institutions. Hence the 2G scandal, the spike in the Maoist insurgency due to the dispossession of tribals by mining companies, the killings of whistle-blowers by the land mafia, etc.

The Indian Premier League is decidedly on the crony rather than creative side of the ledger. The original auction for teams was shrouded in secrecy—the allocations were not made on the basis of bids transparently offered and assessed. Player prices do not accurately reflect cricketing worth either. Thus foreign players are paid a fraction of what Indian players of comparable quality are paid.

The most egregious form of cronyism, however, is the ownership of an IPL team by the current President (and former Secretary) of the Board of Control for Cricket in India. It is as if Alex Ferguson was simultaneously manager of Manchester United and the President of the British Football Association. Tragically, the cronyism runs down the line. The current Chairman of Selectors is the brand ambassador of the team owned and run by the Board President. The famous former cricketers who cover Indian cricket on television have been consultants to the IPL. Other commentators have accepted assignments from IPL teams. To put it bluntly, their silence on this (and some other matters) has been bought.

The IPL has given capitalism and entrepreneurship a bad game. But it has also been bad for Indian democracy, in that it has vividly and even brazenly underlined the distance between the affluent urban middle classes and the rest of India. Consider the fact that no city in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, which has an excellent Ranji Trophy team, was awarded a franchise. Nor any city in Bihar, Orissa, or Madhya Pradesh either. To leave out four of India's largest states—all cricket-mad, and which collectively account for close to half the country's population—must seriously disqualify the League's claim to be 'Indian'.

Yet it can still be called 'Premier', for it speaks for the more prosperous parts of India, and for the more prosperous sections within them. The very names of the teams are a clue to its elitist character—two 'Kings', two 'Royals', and one 'Knight', this in a democratic Republic whose Constitution and laws (rightly) did away with aristocratic titles of any kind.

The IPL is explicitly biased against the poorer states of the Union, and implicitly biased towards what, in marketing argot, is referred to as 'S(ocio)E(conomic)C(lass)-1'. Maharashtra has two IPL teams, based in its largest and richest cities, yet it is the upper strata of Pune and Mumbai society that most closely follow these teams. Some watch the matches at home, over a drink and after a hard day at the office; others go to the stadium, seeking vicariously to soak in the glamour of those even richer than themselves. That is to say, they go not so much to see Virat Kohli or Sachin Tendulkar bat, but to be in the same privileged space as the Nita Ambanis and the

Shahrukh Khans, this fleeting proximity reassurance that they too are within that part of India which is Shining as well as Winning.

The middle classes of the major metros are large and prosperous enough to sustain the IPL. But the rest of India, that is to say, the majority of India, does not appear to connect with the tournament. When there is a match on at the KSCA, there are crowds in the ground and in pubs in central Bangalore, but no interest in the poorer parts of the city or in villages ten or twenty miles away.

On the other hand, when the national team plays, as India, the peasant and the slum dweller can follow its fortunes as keenly as the hedge fund manager and software engineer. The IPL is exclusive; the Indian team inclusive. Notably, they do not live in separate worlds; rather, they are connected, with the former having a decided impact on the latter. Had the Indian cricket team six weeks off after the 2011 World Cup, they may not have lost four-nil to England in that summer's Test series. Two of India's leading batsmen and its leading bowler were carrying injuries sustained by playing in the IPL, which was held immediately after the World Cup. The weariness and the exhaustion carried over into the Australian series, likewise lost four-zero, and into successive one-day tournaments, where the World Cup champions were humiliated by such sides as Bangladesh. The ordinary cricket lover now knew what our 'professional' cricket commentators were too nervous or too polite to say—that too much cricket, and too much of the wrong kind of cricket, was a major reason behind the disgraceful performance of the Indian team in the latter half of 2011.

English and Australian cricket administrators may have other (and less salutary) reasons to dislike the IPL—namely, that it has shifted the balance of power in world cricket away from the white countries to India. However, some former colonial countries should be less than pleased with the tournament as well. Thus, the international game would benefit hugely if the West Indies were to somehow rediscover the art of winning Test and one-day matches. Recently, the West Indies have fought hard in series against Australia and England; their pluck might have been rewarded with victory had they the services of their best bowler, Sunil Narine; their best batsman, Chris Gayle; and their best all-rounder, Dwayne Bravo—all, alas, choosing to play in the IPL instead of for their national side.

There is a larger, cosmopolitan, reason to dislike the IPL; and also a local, patriotic, one. The baleful effects of the tournament should worry Indians liberals who admire that form of capitalism which rewards those with the best ideas rather than those with the best contacts; Indian democrats who wish to nurture a more caring and just society; and Indian cricket fans who want their team to perform honorably at home and abroad.

(published in The Hindu, 26th May 2012)

## **Congress Party Must Get Over The Gandhis**

A joke doing the rounds several months ago was that the “I” in Brics stood for Indonesia. Recent events lend credence to that witticism. Indian growth rates are closer to 6 per cent than 8 per cent. Inflation rates exceed 10 per cent.

The rupee is at its lowest-ever level against the US dollar. Long-promised reforms such as the opening of the retail sector and the promotion of a countrywide goods and services tax have been abandoned.

The Indian economy is slowing and spluttering, and will continue to do so for some time. Behind this economic stagnation is a deeper story of political degradation. The country’s greatest political party is in steady decline. Founded in 1885, the Indian National Congress led a successful mass movement against colonial rule.

After independence, it gave the country a democratic and secular constitution, nurtured an industrial and technological base, and, most crucially, constructed a unified nation out of many divided parts.

Congress is in power in New Delhi, as it has been for all but 13 years since India’s independence in 1947. Yet this government is without energy and purpose. Even the weakest of minority governments were not so hopeless and apathetic.

The apathy is linked to the beleaguered status of the party’s main leaders. Last year, Sonia Gandhi, the Congress president, spent several weeks abroad because of an unspecified illness. Since her return, she has made few public appearances.

Rahul Gandhi, the party’s general secretary and presumed heir-apparent, is sulking after a humiliating election defeat suffered in Uttar Pradesh, India’s largest state, where he led the campaign.

Manmohan Singh, the prime minister, is visibly weakened, both physically and politically. With a history of cardiac problems, and just four months shy of his 80th birthday, he faces the additional burden of presiding over a government beset by a series of corruption scandals.

The crises of the Congress, in party and in government, are connected to the declining charisma of its first family. When Ms Gandhi entered politics in 1998, she was admired for honouring the martyrdom of her husband and mother-in-law, Rajiv and Indira Gandhi, and for seeking to serve the nation. Rahul Gandhi, on the other hand, is seen by many Indians as at best well-meaning and at worst as a spoilt child of privilege. His views on economics, governance and foreign affairs are largely unrecorded.

The urban middle class observes that in eight years in parliament he has not made a single important speech. Rural people note that Rahul Gandhi’s periodic visits to ask for their votes are



interspersed with far longer stretches in New Delhi or overseas. He lacks, for the former, the intelligence and stature to be a statesman, and for the latter, the commitment and zeal to be a grassroots leader.

That is to say, and to put it very politely, Rahul Gandhi is no Jawaharlal Nehru or Indira Gandhi.

Despite its weaknesses, the Congress remains the only national party, with a presence in all 28 states of the republic. It was the mother party of Indian freedom and it remains, in theory, above sectarian divides of caste and religion. Its cosmopolitanism should appeal to the now very large middle class, while its welfarist orientation should attract large sections of the poor. That it doesn't appeal to either class, as recent state elections show, has much to do with the quality of the party's leadership.

In two years the country will face a general election. The prospects for the Congress appear dismal. Presently, Indians of talent and ambition are inhibited from joining or even voting for the Congress owing to its prevailing culture of deference and sycophancy.

A revival can come about only through a radical act, such as the replacement of the incompetent prime minister with a younger, more focused Congress leader whose surname is not Gandhi. The message this would send is that competence is valued above genes or loyalty.

Realists or cynics will say the measure I propose is too radical for Ms Gandhi to contemplate. Yet it may be the only way to rescue India's oldest party from irrelevance and extinction.

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### **Varieties Of Censorship**

In about the year 1985, I was having dinner with two friends in Chungwa Restaurant, off Chittaranjan Avenue in central Kolkata. We had been undergraduates together in Delhi in the 1970s; now, a decade later, we were in our first jobs, I as an academic, the other two as journalists. We spoke, among other things, of our current projects. One of the journalists said he was working on a story about chemical pollution, caused by a plant owned by a large industrial house outside the city. The other journalist wondered if that was a good idea. Remember, he told his colleague, that your magazine and my newspaper both depend on advertisements from companies such as the one you propose to investigate. Why then cause offence to them and/or embarrassment to your editor?

I remembered that conversation when reading a recent cover story in a Delhi newsmagazine about threats to press freedom. The cover announced that the media was under attack from all

corners, the onslaught recalling the dark days of the Emergency of 1975-7. The hyperbole was characteristic; too many people now see in any arbitrary act of the Indian state echoes of the notorious Emergency.

The main story in the magazine looked critically at a Bill sought to be introduced in the Lok Sabha by the Congress M. P. Meenakshi Natarajan, which, if passed, would have given the state sweeping powers to ban coverage of national or international events, to levy massive fines on newspapers who violated the ban, and even to withdraw their licenses. Other attempts to gag social media were also itemized and deplored.

The Indian state does indeed inhibit the free flow of news in very many ways. Archaic, colonial-era laws permit it to ban books, magazines, and even maps that offend one or other state functionary. The state's paranoid attitude in these matters is also reflected in the ban on private radio stations carrying news bulletins. Community radio, a participatory and emancipatory form of media that has deeply enriched democratic functioning in many countries (including Nepal) is made unfeasible in India, because the law does not permit, say, a radio station run by a village panchayat in Jharkhand commenting on corruption in the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme.

The state regulates and curbs the media in more specific ways as well. Mamata Bannerjee is not the first, nor shall she be the last, Chief Minister to stop giving government advertisements to newspapers that may, for entirely sound reasons, have been critical of particular policies of her Government. Individual Ministers in both the States and in the Centre are known to have instructed their department to favour, in the matter of government ads, certain newspapers rather than others. Some have gone further, sending party goons to physically harm reporters who dared write less than flattering reports about their department or their government.

State interference in the media is often arbitrary and sometimes excessive. The cover story in the newsmagazine was therefore welcome, but I was struck by the fact that in seven or eight closely printed pages, there was only one short paragraph dealing with what, in the India of today, may be as important a threat to press freedom as state intimidation—namely, the distortions in the free flow of information imposed by large and powerful corporations.

Consider, for instance, the phenomenon of 'paid news', whereby periodicals reproduce PR handouts from companies extolling their achievements as if they were neutrally reporting the 'news'. Some papers have gone so far as to sign private treaties with companies, getting a share of their stock in exchange for favourable coverage on the news pages.

Paid news is a direct, even brazen, form of media corruption; but private firms also distort the news in more subtle, understated, ways. Back in the 1980s, following popular movements such as the Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan, there was a wave of media coverage of environmental issues. Outstanding reporters such as Anil Agarwal, Kalpana Sharma, Usha Rai, Darryl D' Monte and others wrote fine reports and essays on the social and economic impacts of

deforestation, soil erosion, air and water pollution, and the like. In the 1990s, however, when liberalization became all the rage, several newspapers cut back on their environmental coverage, very likely as a result of pressure from advertisers. One Delhi newspaper, known in the 1970s and 1980s for the quality of its grassroots reporting and for its independent views, became a unofficial spokesman for the Confederation of Indian Industry. Other newspapers laid off their environmental reporters or sent them to cover the stock market instead.

Like Ministers, corporations also withdraw advertisements from newspapers or channels that have run stories critical of them. However, they do so without issuing loud threats. The withdrawal may sometimes be followed by a quiet phone call to the editor or proprietor, who—in more cases than we should be happy to acknowledge—sues for peace, by chastising the offending reporter and/or promising not to transgress in that direction again.

In the India of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, the press may have been excessively hostile to big (and small) business. Entrepreneurs were then seen as greedy, grasping creatures, who contaminated the dream of a socialistic India. Now the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. There is, in the English-language media at any rate, a reverential, almost worshipful, attitude, towards private entrepreneurs, the worship increasing proportionately to the subject's wealth.

Striking in this respect is the very different attitude of television anchors to politicians and businessmen. Cabinet Ministers and major Opposition figures are sharply, sometimes savagely, interrogated—as they should be. On the other hand, those who own or run large corporations are never asked tough questions. 'Sunilji', the anchor purrs, sweetly, the manner of address making it manifest that this 'interview' is nothing more, or less, than an extended exercise in ego massage.

An illustration from personal experience may serve to show how deferential towards big business sections of the English media have become. I was out of the country from January to March this year, in which time I logged on to 'Google News' every morning to keep abreast of what was happening back home. But it was only when I returned that I discovered that the company run by India's richest man had, when I was away, bought a large stake in an influential media house. One would have thought that there would have been some serious scrutiny about what this meant for the independence and integrity of the press. If there was, it seems to have escaped me. My cynicism was deepened when, in the time since I have been back, several magazines have run sycophantic stories about the wife of India's richest man (now also India's newest media magnate), depicting her as a paragon of beauty, compassion, and wisdom, as (so to say) combining the best qualities of Mother Teresa, Amartya Sen, and Princess Diana. Ironically, one of these puff pieces was carried in the very issue of the Delhi periodical that compared Meenakshi Natarajan's Bill to the actions of V. C. Shukla and Sanjay Gandhi during the Emergency.

To be sure, there remain some independent voices in the media, journalists and columnists and editors who do not, in the search for truth, brook interference either from the state or from private industrialists. The journalist friend who, back in 1985, wished to write about chemical pollution still labours away, honourably. Thirty-five years in the profession have not dimmed his passion nor sullied his integrity. Among his recent pieces of work are a report to the Press Council on paid news, and a film on the mining mafia in Karnataka.

What however of the other journalist at that Chungwa luncheon table, who suggested that advertisers should have a say in which stories could or could not be printed? That preternaturally prudent young man is now, in middle age, a Rajya Sabha M. P. of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

(published in The Telegraph, 19th May 2012)

### **Ecology And Democracy**

The Western Ghats are as important to the ecological and cultural life of the nation as the Himalaya. Running from Maharashtra right down to Kerala, they are a staggeringly rich reservoir of biodiversity. They give rise to many important rivers and are home to many significant places of pilgrimage. Their forests, fields and rivers sustain tens of millions of farmers, herders, fisherfolk, pastoralists, and artisans.

Over the past few decades, however, the ecological integrity of the Western Ghats has been subjected to sharp and sometimes savage attack. Unregulated logging, open-cast mining, large dams, and the diversion of land to real-estate barons has led to environmental degradation as well as social discontent.

In March 2010, the Ministry of Environment and Forests asked Professor Madhav Gadgil to head an Expert Committee to study the situation in the Western Ghats, and recommend how best to reconcile the sometimes competing claims of environment and development. This was a wise, even inspired, choice. Gadgil is a world-renowned ecologist; born close to the Western Ghats, he has spent his professional life doing fieldwork in its woods, streams, villages and fields. Moreover, he is a pragmatic scientist who does not romanticize rural poverty or the ‘purity’ of nature; rather, he has always sought to find ways of augmenting productivity and incomes while maintaining environmental stability.

The Committee headed by Madhav Gadgil had other top ecologists as members. Government officials and civil society activists were also represented. Between March 2010 and August 2011, the Committee held fourteen panel meetings. Its members travelled extensively in the Western Ghats, meeting a wide range of stakeholders. It held eight consultations with Government agencies and forty consultations with civil society groups. It commissioned forty-two papers by experts.

In September 2011, the Committee presented a 300 page report to the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The report is likely to be exhaustive as well as balanced, brimming with insight and information. For it is the work of scientists rather than ideologues. Alas, I cannot be more specific, for, in an astonishingly short-sighted move, the Ministry has refused to make the document public. Worse, it has given no indication to the hardworking members that their service has been recognized or appreciated. Requests for appointments made by Professor Gadgil himself have been refused.

The Government's secrecy has been challenged by civil society groups. An activist based in Kerala appealed to the Central Information Commission urging that the report be released. The CIC asked the Environment Ministry the reasons for its decision. The (ambiguous) answer was that the 'scientific or economic interests of the State' would be adversely affected if the report was made public. An official said the Ministry was worried that that if the Gadgil Committee report was released, there would be 'an influx of proposals for declaration of eco-sensitive zones in the Western Ghats' by various individuals and organizations.

The CIC considered the Ministry's reasons, before rejecting them as unpersuasive. In an order issued last month, it quoted a judgement of Justice Mathew in a case of 1975: 'The people of this country have a right to know every public act, everything that is done in a public way by their public functionaries. They are entitled to know the particulars of every public transaction in all its bearing.'

The Information Commissioner hearing the appeal noted that 'in a democracy, the masters of the government are the citizens and the argument that public servants will decide policy matters by not involving them—without disclosing the complete reasons to the masters—is specious'. He observed that reports commissioned from scientific experts and at government expense, must be made accessible to citizens. 'This would facilitate an informed discussion between citizens [and the government] based on a report prepared with their/public money.'

The Commissioner further observed that even if the Government 'decides not to accept the findings or recommendations [of such reports], their significance as an important input cannot be disregarded arbitrarily. If such reports are put in [the] public domain, citizens' views and concerns can be articulated in a scientific and reasonable manner. If the Government has reasons to ignore the reports, these should be logically put before people. Otherwise citizens would believe that the Government's decisions are arbitrary or corrupt. Such a trust deficit would never be in the interests of the Nation'.

The CIC's conclusion was forthright: putting the report in the public domain would 'bring greater trust in the government and its functionaries, and hurt only the corrupt'. It instructed the Ministry to provide an attested photocopy of the report to the applicant by 5th May, and to put it on the Ministry website by 10th May.

Rather than follow the CIC's orders, the Ministry has chosen to appeal its decision in court. This is deeply unfortunate. For one of the few positives of the second UPA Government has been the performance of the Ministry of Environment and Forests. The two Ministers who have held office since 2009 have both been focused and hardworking. They have infused energy into a previously moribund department, allowing it to more closely fulfil its original mandate, of assuring—or at least arguing for—a model of development that is sustainable rather than predatory.

That hard-won credibility has now been put at stake by the decision not to release the Western Ghats report. One can only speculate at the 'special interests' that lie behind this move. Suffice it to say that those interests are antithetical to ecology, democracy, and to the history and heritage of the Western Ghats themselves.

(published in The Hindu, 12th May 2012)

### **Letting Azad Win**

In the third week of March 1940, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad delivered the Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the Indian National Congress, held that year in Ramgarh in Bihar. Azad here spoke of secularism as India's 'historic destiny', proof of which was in 'our languages, our poetry, our literature, our culture, our dress, our manners and our customs', all of which bore the 'stamp of our joint endeavour' (as Hindus and as Muslims). Azad insisted that 'whether we like it or not, we have now become an Indian nation, united and indivisible. No fantasy or artificial scheming to separate or divide can break this unity.'

A few days later, the Muslim League met for its annual meeting in Lahore, where its President, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, put forward a radically different point of view. Hindus and Muslims, he believed, 'belong to two different civilizations which are based mainly on conflicting ideas and conceptions'. Jinnah thought it 'a dream that Hindus and Muslims can evolve a common nationality.'

In the short-term, Jinnah won the debate. In 1947, Pakistan was created as a separate homeland for the Muslims of the sub-continent. Azad was deeply demoralized by this defeat, but his friend and comrade, Jawaharlal Nehru, set out to win the argument in the long-term. Millions of Muslims had stayed behind in India; to these, Nehru offered the ideal, and hope, of a common citizenship in a secular state.

Partition had been accompanied by ethnic cleansing and bloody riots. Remarkably, the first decade-and-a-half of Independence was largely free of Hindu-Muslim violence. This was in good part due to Nehru's leadership. He helped make Muslims feel secure in a largely Hindu nation; at the same time, he kept the forces of Hindutva extremism at bay.

In 1963, after the theft of a relic of the Prophet Muhammad from a shrine in Kashmir, there was violence against Hindus in what was then East Pakistan, followed by violence against Muslims in West Bengal and Orissa. In 1969 there was a major riot in Ahmedabad. The 1970s also saw some serious bouts of Hindu-Muslim rioting (in Moradabad and Jamshedpur, among other places). However, it was really in the 1980s and 1990s that the Gandhi-Azad-Nehru ideal of a secular India came under serious threat.

The communal polarization of those decades was enabled by two grossly cynical moves—the annulling by Rajiv Gandhi of the Supreme Court judgement in the Shah Bano case, and the rath yatra of L. K. Advani. These two acts helped fuel a wave of religious violence across northern and western India, a violence so regular and so widespread that those decades still seem, to one who lived through them, to be best captured in the title of a book by M. J. Akbar, ‘Riot after Riot’. Notably, in all states except Jammu and Kashmir, Muslims suffered massively. Despite being a minority, far more Muslim lives were burnt, and Muslim homes burnt, than Hindu ones. There were now real fears that India was becoming a Hindu Pakistan.

This cycle ended with the Gujarat riots of 2002. In the decade since, there has been no serious Hindu-Muslim riot in India. This is the first ten-year-period since Jawaharlal Nehru’s death of which this can be said. Indeed, the diminution of sectarian conflict is the one genuinely cheering thing about India today, small consolation—but consolation nevertheless—in the face of corruption scandals, growing economic inequalities, galloping environmental degradation, et. al.

My own impression, based on travels around the country and conversations with a variety of Indians, is that this cooling of communal tempers is occurring independently and simultaneously on both sides of the spectrum. Hindus who once went along with the Ayodhya movement now see the futility of constructing a nation’s agenda around a single temple. Having witnessed (and suffered) the BJP in power in New Delhi, they now know that, far from being a ‘party with a difference’, it is driven by greed and personal ambition. Meanwhile, the ordinary Muslim is breaking free of the reactionary mullahs who once presumed to speak for the community. He, and increasingly she, is no longer moved by talk of the past glories of Islam—rather, they seek education and jobs in the modern economy.

The contrast with Pakistan in this respect can be striking. In Lahore, once a showpiece of cosmopolitanism, the women on the streets are mostly in burqas. In Bihar, once a byword for backwardness, Muslim girls go unaccompanied on cycles to school. Barely a handful of Indian Muslims have joined terrorist organizations; whereas tens of thousands of Pakistanis have done so. Indian Islam retains its diverse and plural character; Pakistani Islam has increasingly gone the Wahabi way. Here, unlike there, Shias, Ahmediyas, Khojas and Ismailis are not under threat from Sunni fundamentalists.

Have Nehru and Azad then finally won the argument? Is, will, must, secularism be India’s destiny? It is too early to say. The social peace of the past decade, the shedding of reactionary

tendencies by Hindus and Muslims, could yet be reversed by the scheming of politicians. The bans on cow-slaughter and the mandatory teaching of the Bhagavad Gita in BJP-ruled states are inimical to the secularism that the nation's founders sought. So are the job quotas for Muslims so energetically pursued by the Congress party. Pace Azad, these schemes are not so much artificial as malevolent. The former seek to provoke Muslims; the latter, to placate them. Neither is consistent with the claims of equal citizenship. For the sake of Hindus, Muslims, and India itself, these schemes must be withdrawn, or, through the pressure of democratic public opinion, be made to fail.

(published in the Hindustan Times, March 16th, 2012)

### **States Of The Nation**

General Elections are all-India affairs, with citizens in twenty-eight states taking part to elect a new Parliament. On the other hand, elections to Legislative Assemblies have a particular resonance for the citizens of the state, or states, going to the polls. Some state elections, however, are of national significance. The first such was the Kerala elections of 1957, when the ruling Congress Party was defeated by the Communist Party of India (CPI). Earlier in the same decade, the Communists had launched an armed insurrection against the Indian state, seeking to replace it with a one-party dictatorship. They gave up arms and came overground to fight the first General Elections, held in 1952. This the Congress comfortably won, but the CPI emerged as the single largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha.

Their victory in Kerala in 1957 consolidated the Communists' image as the only serious challenger to Congress hegemony. This may have been why a coalition of anti-Communist forces—the Catholic Church, the Nair Service Society, and the Congress Party itself—organized mass protests against a legally elected government, whereupon it was dismissed by the Centre. In the mid-term elections, held in 1960, the Congress regained power in Kerala.

Till Jawaharlal Nehru's death the Congress held sway all across the country. In the General Elections of 1967, the first held with no Nehru to lead their campaign, India's oldest political party still won power at the Centre. But they were routed in Tamil Nadu (then known as Madras), where the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam won a comfortable majority, riding a wave of anti-Congress, anti-Central Government, and anti-North Indian sentiment provoked by an attempt by New Delhi to impose Hindi by administrative fiat. This was the Congress's most decisive defeat (it had long considered Madras a stronghold), but in 1967 it also lost power to an alliance of dissident Congressmen and Communists in West Bengal, and to other anti-Congress coalitions in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Orissa. It was now said, with some wonder and astonishment, that one could travel all the way from Delhi to Howrah and not pass through a single Congress-ruled state.



These losses in 1967 prompted a major reorientation in the Congress. The Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, previously not known for her strong political convictions, now repositioned herself as a socialist. She nationalized the banks, abolished the privy purses, and called an early General Election, campaigning under the stirring slogan of 'Garibi Hatao'! This allowed the Congress to win a massive majority at the Centre, and also to recapture several State Assemblies in the north and east.

Indira Gandhi's victory at the polls in January 1971 was followed by an equally emphatic victory on the battle-field in the last month of the same year. Some credit for the independence of Bangladesh accrued to the Mukti Bahini, some to the Indian Army, but much, or even most, was reserved for the Indian Prime Minister, who showed her human side in providing a home for millions of refugees and her political side in provoking a war she knew her side would win. These twin victories imbued her with a sense of arrogance, and even invulnerability. In the past the Congress was supposed to have a divine right to rule; now that right, she thought, had passed on to a single family. She was wrong—for, in the next General Elections, held in 1977, the Congress was trounced in the Centre and in many northern states as well.

The next state elections to have a national significance were held in 1983. In that year, the Congress lost power for the first time in Karnataka. More striking still was its loss in Andhra Pradesh, where too it had hitherto been undefeated. Now, after an insult levelled at the state's Chief Minister by Rajiv Gandhi, a famous film star named N. T. Rama Rao started a party to restore Telugu pride, damaged by decades of Congress misrule. His Telugu Desam Party had no history, no organization, no money, no real ideology even. No one, least of all the English-language media, gave it a ghost of a chance. In the event, the charisma (and energy) of a single man was enough to overcome the money, history, and organizational power of the Congress Party. This was arguably the most spectacular defeat the Congress had suffered; for its previous conquerors, such as the Communists, the DMK and the Janata Party, were all led by experienced politicians who had a solid cadre of co-workers to organize their campaigns.

The elections recently held in Uttar Pradesh are, in this respect, a radical departure from the historical trend. Unlike Kerala in 1957, Tamil Nadu in 1967, West Bengal in 1977, or Andhra Pradesh in 1983, in this case the Congress entered the polls not as a dominant behemoth but as a party on the margins, seeking desperately to make a comeback in a state where it has had little influence in recent years. The UP elections acquired an added significance because the most important of the younger Congress leaders, Rahul Gandhi, had staked so much on its outcome. He had made it known that he regarded the UP elections of 2012 as a 'semi-final', a prelude to the General Elections currently scheduled for 2014. In the past year Rahul Gandhi had toured through the state, monitored the screening and selection of his party's candidates, and addressed dozens of public meetings himself.

Much was at stake for the other parties as well. The Bharatiya Janata Party had begun its rise to national prominence via Uttar Pradesh; it had been in power in the state episodically in the 1980s

and 1990s, but had declined considerably since. If it were to seriously challenge the Congress at the national level it needed to make an impressive show in UP. These elections were crucial for the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party too. The latter was desperate to regain power in the state; the former, to retain power. For both parties, a good performance in these elections would augment its influence at the Centre.

The elections in Uttar Pradesh were arguably among the five most important state elections held since Indian independence. Four parties were deeply invested in the outcome—the BJP and the Congress, for whom a good performance would augur well for their hopes to lead a successful coalition in the next General Elections; and the BSP and the SP, for whom a winning performance would consolidate their position in India's largest state and also allow them to play a more active role in New Delhi.

Such were the expectations of the four major players in the polls. How must each feel now that the results are in? The Samajwadi Party must be very pleased; the other three parties, desperately disappointed. The pleasure and disappointment is collective as well as individual. As an early report on the results had it, 'Yadav scion up, Gandhi scion down.' From late last year, the English-language media had made much of Rahul Gandhi's campaigning in UP, writing extensively—and often breathlessly—of his stays in Dalit homes and his visits to Jat farmers. Meanwhile, Akhilesh Yadav worked steadily away in his home state, rather than make occasional speculative visits from the safety of New Delhi. It was only in the last stages of polling that the press realized that the dehati dynast was making a far greater impact than Rahul Gandhi.

Once the exit polls made clear the extent of the Congress's defeat, the chamchas sought to distance their leader from the result. Digvijay Singh, Salman Khurshid, Renuka Chowdhury, and Rita Bahuguna-Joshi all blamed it on the hapless 'party worker'. To his credit, Rahul Gandhi has accepted that he must take primary responsibility. The results are a massive setback to his party, and to him personally. Already, in states far away from UP, regional leaders such as Jayalalithaa and Mamata Banerjee are seeing in the humiliation of the Congress the possibilities of a Third Front Government in 2014.

(published in The Telegraph, 10th March, 2012)

### **Uttar Pradesh Past And Present**

In his charming memoir, Lucknow Boy, Vinod Mehta writes of the leisurely pace of life in his home town. Like most students of his class and generation, he paid little attention to books and exams, spending his time rather in the streets and cafés of Lucknow. A Punjabi Hindu, Mehta numbered two Muslims among his closest friends. The early chapters of his book feature Parsis, Christians, Sikhs, and South Indians too. Reflecting on this experience, Mehta writes that

‘Lucknow bestowed on me one priceless gift. It taught me to look on the individual rather than his religion or caste or the tongue he spoke.’

Mehta believes that because his ‘secularism was deeply personal’, because it was learned through life, not academic instruction, ‘because it was instinctive and not the by-product of logic’, it ‘has better weathered the periodic communal storms which have battered our republic.’ His experience resonates with mine. I grew up in another large town in Uttar Pradesh, where the population was likewise mixed. My closest friends were Sikhs. My sister’s Bharata Natyam teacher was a Tamil Christian. The town’s best known dentist was a Parsi.

The life of the middle classes in the UP of the 1950s and 1960s was, in a word, Nehruvian. Jawaharlal Nehru himself was a native of Uttar Pradesh. Within the state and out of it, he energetically promoted religious harmony. It is a striking fact that despite the creation of a Muslim homeland and the violence that accompanied it, the decade after Partition was a decade of communal peace. Muslims and Christians and Sikhs felt safe in newly independent India because Jawaharlal Nehru made them feel so.

Nehru’s commitment to secularism is well known. Less talked of nowadays is his struggle to overcome the sectarian identities of caste and region. He asked his fellow citizens to forget the divisions of the past by building a future in which all could share. Thus his emphasis on, and even enchantment with, economic planning. It is commonly argued that Nehru’s preference for an interventionist state was a product of his dislike for the market. In fact, it was equally a product of his hope that in coming together to build steel plants and large dams the citizens of India would overcome their parochial identities. Writing to Chief Ministers in December 1952, Nehru said that behind the First Five Year Plan ‘lay the conception of India’s unity and of a mighty co-operative effort of all the people of India.’ If Indians focused strongly on economic planning and development, then, he thought, ‘the less we are likely to go astray in the crooked paths of provincialism, communalism, casteism and all other disruptive and disintegrating tendencies.’

Nehru’s worldview was both cosmopolitan and egalitarian. In practice, however, Hindu upper castes maintained their dominance. In the Uttar Pradesh in which Vinod Mehta and I were raised, the most powerful politicians tended to be Brahmins, such as Hemavati Nandan Bahuguna and Kamalapati Tripathi, or Banias, such as C. B. Gupta. The hegemony of the suvarna was consolidated by the control they exercised on the upper levers of the administration. Senior bureaucrats and judges in Uttar Pradesh often bore Brahmin names like Mishra and Shukla or Kayasth titles such as Saxena and Srivastava.

The revolt against upper caste dominance in Uttar Pradesh occurred in two phases. In the 1960s, the Jat leader Charan Singh left the Congress, on the grounds that the party was hostile to the interests of the farmers. At the same time, the Socialists led by Rammanohar Lohia had consolidated the backward castes in opposition to the Congress. These two groups joined hands,

and in 1967 a non-Congress Government was formed with Charan Singh as Chief Minister. Twelve years later, Charan Singh briefly served as the country's first Prime Minister from a farming caste.

The Congress of the 1950s and 1960s was in fact what the BJP was later said to be—at the top, a 'Brahmin-Bania' party. But only at the top. The Dalits voted largely for the Congress, a legacy of the Gandhian years, when the Mahatma had made the ending of untouchability a precondition for swaraj. And the Muslims of UP also voted massively for the Congress, in acknowledgement of what Nehru, in particular, had done to make them feel secure in a post-Partition India.

In the 1980s, a brilliant political entrepreneur named Kanshi Ram began consolidating the Dalits in a voting bloc of their own. Three decades of affirmative action had created an articulate Dalit middle class. Kanshi Ram formed a trade union of Dalit government employees, which was soon transformed into a political party to advance their interests.

The Dalits now increasingly abandoned the Congress for the Bahujan Samaj Party. Meanwhile, the Muslims became disenchanted with the Congress in the wake of the Ayodhya movement. Congress Governments had failed to protect their lives and properties during the communal riots that both preceded and followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Muslims now put their trust in Mulayam Singh and his Samajwadi Party, who had shown greater resolve in combating the Sangh Parivar.

The cumulative effects of these changes has been to radically transform the public discourse of Vinod Mehta's home state. In Uttar Pradesh, identity became all. An individual was now judged chiefly by his caste or religion. This explains why, in his tours through Uttar Pradesh, Nehru's great-grandson, Rahul Gandhi, addressed communities as communities, rather than as aggregations of individuals. First he slept in a Dalit home to send the signal that he cared more for Dalits than their presumed protector, Mayawati. Then he took Sam Pitroda to a meeting of backward castes to suggest that since Pitroda was born in a family of carpenters, and had yet been Rajiv Gandhi's friend, the Congress cared more for OBCs than the Samajwadi Party. Then he stayed conspicuously silent when the Deoband mullahs issued a fatwa against Salman Rushdie, lest he, and the Congress, be seen as 'anti-Muslim'.

The UP election campaign of Rahul Gandhi thus consisted of appeals to a series of sectarian fears. He perhaps thought that these appeals would create a vote bank of some Dalits plus some Muslims plus some backwards, with some Brahmins and some Banias voting Congress out of sentimental attachment to the Nehru-Gandhi family. He hoped thereby to bring around 25% to 30% of the electorate, which in three-and-four-cornered contests would allow the Congress candidate to win.

Instead of adding up these sums, Rahul Gandhi should have looked to the example of Bihar. There, Nitish Kumar realized that the politics of izzat, or self-respect, had played itself out. Dalits, backward castes, and Muslims all now wanted social and economic development. Thus

Kumar's emphasis on schools, public health, and rural roads. But to improve the lives of people one needs also to live (continually and not episodically) alongside the people. Notably, Nitish Kumar left national politics to devote himself exclusively to his home State.

Through much of the election campaign in UP, Rahul Gandhi did not altogether eschew the crooked paths of casteism and communalism. In the last phase, perhaps realizing that this was a mistake, he has spoken of wishing to rid the State of criminality and corruption. At the same time, both Rahul Gandhi and his sister Priyanka have insisted that he does not want to become Prime Minister. These protestations would have carried more weight if he was to have fought an Assembly seat, and made it clear that he was the Congress's Chief Ministerial candidate, thereby exchanging part-time parachuting for full-time commitment. Surely the two hundred million citizens of Uttar Pradesh deserved nothing less.

(The Telegraph, 11th February 2012)

### **Fanatics And Heretics**

In the early 1980s, while coming out of a Marxist phase, I came across *The God that Failed*, a collection of confessional essays by once hard-core Communists who had left the party and renounced its creed. The book was rivetingly readable, in part because of the quality of the writing (Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, and Louis Fischer were among the contributors), in part because erstwhile fanatics are often the most insightful heretics. Thus Terry Eagleton and James Carroll have written penetrating accounts of the Catholic Church, a body that, as one-time aspirant priests, they knew inside-out. And there is now an increasing number of revealing memoirs by lapsed jihadis.

I was reminded of *The God That Failed* by a memoir of the Rasthriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) that I recently came across. Written in the 1970s by the economist S. H. Deshpande, it was originally published in Marathi and later, in English, in the journal *Quest*, under the title 'My Days in the RSS'.

Deshpande was born in 1925, in a village some thirty miles from Poona. He moved to the city in 1938, and joined the Sangh shortly thereafter. Early in his apprenticeship, he attended lectures by the eminent Marathi litterateur P. G. Sahasrabuddhe. Attracted by the commitment of RSS workers, Sahasrabuddhe began delivering lectures to their camps on topical themes, such as 'capitalism', 'socialism', and 'fascism'. However, the experiment soon ran aground, as the scholar 'felt suffocated in an atmosphere which shut off all free discussion', and which 'demanded unswerving loyalty to the [RSS] leader.' In a short period of time, Dr. Sahasrabuddhe 'had been thoroughly disillusioned with the anti-intellectual atmosphere of the RSS'.

Life in the shaka was dominated by physical exercise—drills, marches, and the life. The new entrant compared the morning exercises with the traditional dances of rural Maharashtra. ‘The former was more of a drill, the latter an intoxicating experience, recalled Deshpande: ‘The RSS lezim tended to be more mechanical and though it had vigour, there was no ecstasy in it.’

‘A notable feature of camp life’, remembered Deshpande, was ‘the alarm that might be sounded at the dead of night to warn you of the impending attack of the “enemy”. You then jumped out of the bed, got into your uniform in about a couple of minutes and made a dash for the parade ground.’ The sound of the alarm was ‘indeed frightening. It seemed to shout in your ears, “Get up, get up! The whole camp has caught fire!”’

Deshpande had been told that the RSS was a revolutionary outfit fighting to get rid of the foreigners. Hence his surprise that ‘when the Quit India movement gathered momentum [in 1942] the RSS remained a passive onlooker. In one of the theory classes this isolation was justified on the ground that neither the RSS nor the country was yet strong enough to overthrow the foreign yoke. The speaker told us that all the blood that was being spilled in the firings was in vain!’

Many years later, while looking back on his time in the Sangh, Deshpande concluded that the main achievement of the organization was ‘the sense of unity and brotherhood the RSS was successful in creating in the minds of its adherents. True, this is confined to the Hindus, but the fact cannot be overlooked that in spite of its Maharashtrian parentage, the RSS is wholly devoid of any chauvinistic Maharashtrianism.... In fact, the easy camaraderie amongst its volunteers, be they Tamils, Bengalis, Maharashtrians or Punjabis, is its most heartening feature.’

On the other hand, ‘even a second-rate intellectualism had no place in the RSS scheme of things.’ The anti-intellectualism of the Sangh, recalled this former member, was responsible ‘for the utter vacuousness of the speeches that were delivered at the meetings misnamed theory classes.’ For one thing, the speaker was chosen ‘not so much for his erudition as for the rank he occupied in the RSS hierarchy. So long as he merely mouthed sentimental platitudes, you found him at least bearable. But the moment he sought to give a theoretical basis to his arguments, he would stand exposed. This consisted of clichés like “Hindustan belongs to the Hindus”, “The Saffron flag is our National flag”, “One Nation, One Leader”, which would be repeated ad nauseam.’

Sometimes the speaker himself found the slogan-mongering wearying. Then he would instead ‘evoke the “glorious” past of the Hindus, or ridicule the democratic polity, or find fault with the Indian National Congress because it was “founded by the British”. The discipline of the Germans and Italians would be extolled...’ Listening to all this, S. H. Deshpande ‘searched in vain for any rational or original thought in all this demagoguery.’ The RSS ‘combined this intellectual poverty with intolerance of criticism.’ The economist grimly remembered that in his years in the Sangh

‘at least three Marathi authors were physically assaulted for writing articles which were critical of the RSS philosophy.’

The Sangh was close-minded in general, but, remarked Deshpande, it was ‘vis-à-vis the Muslims that this intolerance of the RSS acquired sharp edge. ... [T]he image of a Muslim in the minds of an RSS volunteer is often extremely bizarre. An intellectual friend of mine, who like me has now left the RSS, only grudgingly concedes that a Muslim too could be a well-educated, cultured and soft-spoken person. He cannot yet get rid of the equation, “a Muslim=a dagger”!’

There have, in recent years, been a series of closely researched books on the Sangh Parivar by Indian and Western scholars. However, to my mind the best book on the RSS remains that written by D. R. Goyal, who—like S. H. Deshpande—was a once fervent swayamsevak who later left the organization. In a passage of striking clarity, Goyal sums up the ideology of the Sangh as follows:

‘Hindus have lived in India since times immemorial; Hindus are the nation because all culture, civilisation and life is contributed by them alone; non-Hindus are invaders or guests and cannot be treated as equal unless they adopt Hindu traditions, culture etc... ; the history of India is the history of the struggle of the Hindus for protection and preservation of their religion and culture against the onslaught of these aliens; the threat continues because the power is in the hands of those who do not believe in this nation as a Hindu Nation; those who talk of national unity as the unity of all those who live in this country are motivated by the selfish desire of cornering minority votes and are therefore traitors; the unity and consolidation of the Hindus is the dire need of the hour because the Hindu people are surrounded on all sides by enemies; the Hindus must develop the capacity for massive retaliation and offense is the best defence; lack of unity is the root cause of all the troubles of the Hindus and the Sangh is born with the divine mission to bring about that unity.’

D. R. Goyal adds that ‘without fear of contradiction it can be stated that nothing more than this has been said in the RSS shakhas during the past 74 years of its existence’. Goyal was writing in 1999—but nothing more has been said in those shakhas in the past thirteen years either.

(published in The Telegraph, 28th January 2012)

### **The Pen Over The Sword Always**

In a recent essay in Frontline magazine, Ghulam Murshid writes of the ups and downs of Tagore’s reputation in Bangladesh. So long as it was East Pakistan, the poet was not looked upon very favourably—in part because he came from an upper-class landed family, in larger part because he was a Hindu. As the Tagore centenary celebrations approached in 1961, newspapers supported or funded by the Pakistani government ran many articles villifying the poet.

State propaganda could not quench or conquer the people's own inclinations. As the movement for an independent Bangladesh gathered pace, Tagore's songs, especially those extolling the beauties of his native land, were sung again and again, in a simultaneous defiance of West Pakistani domination and affirmation of Bengali nationalism. To those who sang Tagore—or performed his plays and dance dramas—he came, writes Ghulam Murshid, to 'symbolise the spirit of a secular Bengali culture.'

Tagore did not have a chauvinist or communal bone in his body. Nor did his younger contemporary, Nazrul Islam, despite several attempts over the years to represent him as a poet of or for the Muslims. Although he spent his last few years in Dhaka and is recognized as the 'national' poet of a professedly 'Islamic' Republic, Nazrul, like Tagore, symbolized the spirit of a secular Bengali culture. Like Tagore, again, he also symbolized outstanding literary achievement—he is a great world poet who merely happened to be born in Bengal and thus wrote in Bengali.

In the last week of December 2011, the West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, announced that a large house in Salt Lake once used as the Chief Minister's residence would be converted into a museum and research centre devoted to the life and works of Nazrul Islam. Although its most recent occupant had been the Communist Jyoti Basu, the building itself was named for Indira Gandhi, who had briefly stayed there in 1972 while attending a session of the All India Congress Committee in Kolkata.

The decision to rename Indira Bhavan as Nazrul Bhavan provoked anger and dismay among leading Congressmen in West Bengal. The state Congress President, Pradip Bhattacharya, wrote to the Chief Minister urging her to restore the building's earlier name. 'The Indira Bhavan is closely associated with the memory of our beloved leader [the late] Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and sentiments of millions of people are involved with the name and memory of Indiraji,' wrote Mr Bhattacharya. If Ms Banerjee did not withdraw her decision, he said, the Congress would organize a series of agitations across the state.

There are four possible reasons why Mamata Banerjee changed the name of this building in Salt Lake. The first is that it expressed a longstanding admiration for the poems and songs of Nazrul Islam. The second is that although Nazrul was himself non-sectarian, the fact that he was born a Muslim and carried a Muslim name might make the renaming attractive to the large Muslim population of West Bengal. The third is that it was a consequence of the growing rift between the Trinamool and its coalition partner, the Congress Party. As with the opposition to FDI in retail and to the provision for Lokayuktas in the Lokpal Bill, Ms Banerjee may have been asserting her independence of the Congress.

A fourth possible reason is that Mamata Banerjee may have wanted to diminish the image of Indira Gandhi, since there is room for only one feminine figure of authority in the political culture of West Bengal. In the aftermath of the Bangladesh war, Indira Gandhi was compared to



Durga—it was soon after that military victory that she stayed in the building in Salt Lake. Forty years later the glow has dimmed, somewhat; and for it to dim further and faster this change of name would be of some assistance.

I have never met Mamata Banerjee, and do not know any of her advisers. I cannot therefore say with any authority which of these reasons were active in the decision to substitute a poet's name for a politician's in a building in eastern Kolkata. Were I to guess, I would say that reasons two and three were at work, rather than reasons one or four. That is to say, the move was most likely motivated by vote-bank politics and the assertion of political independence rather than by a love of literature or a distaste for the cult of personality.

Whatever the reason(s), I must say my first reactions to the renaming were one of pleasure. When I read the news, I remembered an argument I had on television with a spokeswoman of the Congress Party. The new international airport in Hyderabad has just been named for Rajiv Gandhi, an act that owed itself wholly to the facts that the Congress was in power in Andhra Pradesh and in the Centre, and that the Congress President was known to be fanatically devoted to the memory of her late husband. I suggested to the spokeswoman that it would have been more appropriate if the airport had instead carried the name of the composer Thyagaraja, who was arguably the most remarkable individual produced by the Andhra country.

I am not Bengali, and can read the works of Nazrul Islam only in translation. And I have decidedly mixed feelings about Mamata Banerjee. Still, I was delighted with this particular act, for I have long hoped for the greater appreciation within our public culture of the contributions of creative artists. Back in the mid 1990s, I took part in a campaign, led by Gopalkrishna Gandhi and the late H. Y. Sharada Prasad, to have the peerless M. S. Subbulakshmi be awarded the Bharat Ratna. A series of mediocre or malign politicians had been dignified by that distinction, and yet M. S. had been passed by. The campaign succeeded, in that M. S. as well as Lata Mangeshkar, Ravi Shankar and Bismillah Khan were to win the Bharat Ratna, thus somewhat redeeming the reputation of the Republic of India's highest award.

That a public building in Kolkata would now be named for a poet pleased me; as did the fact that it was at Indira Gandhi's expense. For while I admire Jawaharlal Nehru, I have a deep distaste for the dynastic culture of the Congress Party in its Indira and post-Indira phases. With Sonia Gandhi as Party President, this may have reached an all-time low. Legislators and Ministers feel obliged to regularly praise the living Nehru-Gandhis, namely Sonia and Rahul, as well as deceased Nehru-Gandhis, notably Indira and Rajiv. A Congress leader seeking preferment thinks it prudent to name buildings or airports after Indira or Rajiv, or to issue costly advertisements at the taxpayer's expense extolling their real or imagined achievements. The protests of Congressmen in West Bengal at the renaming of Indira Bhavan as Nazrul Bhavan are a manifestation of this culture of deference and sycophancy.

Those who think that, in these acts of naming and renaming, politicians generally get far more than their due, and writers and musicians far less, may therefore take heart from this change in Kolkata. I might also direct their attention to a South Asian city where a poet's name is attached to an entire airport. I refer to the Allama Iqbal International Airport in Lahore. Indians do not always wish to emulate Pakistanis, but they might wish to make an exception in this case. Were a new airport to be built near Puné, who better to name it for than the poet-saint Tukaram? And if ever Kolkata itself were to need a second airport, it could, indeed should, be named for two poets instead of one, for Tagore and for Nazrul Islam, together.

### **Reading For The New Year**

Late last year, seeking to make sense of the conflict between the Anna Hazare movement and the Central Government, I turned to an essay by the Indian scholar I most admire, the sociologist André Bêteille. Published some years ago in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, this set out a distinction between two forms of democratic functioning, which Bêteille termed 'constitutional democracy' and 'populist democracy' respectively. As the sociologist put it:

'Constitutional democracy acts through a prescribed division of functions between legislature, executive and judiciary. Populist democracy regards such division of functions as cumbersome and arbitrary impediments that act overtly or covertly against the will of the people. Populism sets great store by achieving political objectives swiftly and directly through mass mobilization in the form of rallies, demonstrations and other spectacular displays of mass support. Constitutionalism, on the other hand, seeks to achieve its objectives methodically through the established institutions of governance.'

In older Western democracies, the principal focus of decision-making has been the legislature and the executive. Strikes and street protests were, and are, rare. On the other hand, populist methods and techniques have had a strong appeal in countries like India, 'countries that were latecomers to development and without the strong foundations for the rule of law required for the success of a constitutional democracy.'

Having made this crucial distinction, Bêteille then pointed to the deficiencies of both forms of democracy in India today. Populist movements, he noted, drew on 'the Gandhian tradition of civil disobedience used with great effect during the nationalist movement'. However, 'one has to make a distinction between Gandhi and those who have acted in his name after his passing ... . No one has shown—or can be expected to show—the restraint and moral discipline of which he was the great exemplar.'

Writing in 2008, several years before the current wave of anti-corruption protests, the wise sociologist observed that 'it will be hard to deny that agitations, demonstrations and rallies undertaken in the name of civil disobedience have increasingly become coercive not only in their

consequences but even in their intentions.’ By showing contempt for elected leaders, populism called into question all forms of public authority. Thus, as Bêteille observed, ‘populism has not only become a part of our democracy, but from time to time it puts forward its demands in a very imperious form. When that happens, many naturally feel that the Constitution itself is under threat.’

At the same time, Bêteille had some sharp things to say about the deficiencies in the practice, as opposed to the theory, of constitutional democracy in India today. ‘In a parliamentary democracy’, he remarked, ‘the obligations of constitutional morality are expected to be equally binding on the government and the opposition. In India, the same political party treats these obligations very differently when it is in office and when it is out of it. This has contributed greatly to the popular perception of our political system as being amoral.’

Owing to the hypocrisy and arrogance of politicians in power, continued Bêteille, ‘the people of India have gradually learnt that their own elected leaders can be as deaf to their pleas as the ones who came from outside.’ The sociologist went so far as to say that our elected politicians had sometimes ‘shown themselves to be even more venal and self-serving than the British who ruled India.’

Even when non-violent, populist protests were often viewed by constitutional liberals as disruptive and disorderly. On the other side, the corruption and corrosion of our political class had led to an increasing disenchantment with formal processes of decision-making. Bêteille thus foresaw the continuing co-existence within India of these two, somewhat opposed, understandings of democracy. The last paragraph of his essay ran as follows:

‘Our politicians may devise ingenious ways of getting round the Constitution and violating its rules from time to time, but they do not like to see the open defiance of it by others. In that sense the Constitution has come to acquire a significant symbolic value among Indians. But the currents of populism run deep in the country’s political life, and they too have their own moral compulsions. It would appear therefore that the people of India are destined to oscillate endlessly between the two poles of constitutionalism and populism without ever discarding the one or the other.’

The populists speak in the name of Gandhi, but, as Bêteille notes, they often depart from the Mahatma’s methods. The gap may be even larger on the other side, between the founders of our constitutional democracy, such as Nehru and Ambedkar, and the Ministers and Parliamentarians of today. Whether rulers or protesters, Indians of an earlier age behaved with decency, civility, and restraint, traits so conspicuously absent in the rulers and protesters of our own time.

But we must live in hope. Perhaps, in reflecting in the New Year on the events of the last half of 2011, elected politicians may be compelled to honour their Constitutional obligations more seriously. And perhaps, on the other side, civil society activists will now act with more sobriety and less self-righteousness. To both sides I urge a close reading of the full text of André

Béteille's essay, published, under the title 'Constitutional Morality', in the issue of the Economic and Political Weekly dated 4th October, 2008. In my view, the essay should be mandatory reading for all thinking, reflective, Indians, in whose ranks I would (hopefully and generously) include the likes of Kapil Sibal, P. Chidambaram, Arun Jaitley, Sushma Swaraj, Arvind Kejriwal, and Kiran Bedi.

### **A Plague On All Our Houses**

The Republic of India has a billion (and more) citizens who, at any given time, are involved in a thousand (and more) controversies. Knowing which controversy is the most significant is always hard, and often impossible, to judge. Even so, we can be fairly certain that 2011 will go down in Indian history as the year of the Great Lokpal Debate, just as 1962 was the year of the war with China, 1975 the year of the Emergency, 1991 the year the license-permit-quota-raj was first undermined, 1992 the year the Babri Masjid was demolished.

Vigorous arguments still rage on the causes and consequences of the China War, the Emergency, economic liberalization, and the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. How then does one judge the import of events as they are unfolding? The eight months since Anna Hazare's fast in Jantar Mantar have, even by Indian standards, been very contentious indeed. This coming week, the debate on the Lokpal Bill in Parliament and the threatened 'jail bharo andolan' will complicate the picture further.

It may be decades before a proper historical judgement is passed on the principal characters and events in this controversy. Living through the tamasha myself, I have been successively and sometimes simultaneously bewildered, confused, and exasperated. The first two emotions cannot be explained, but I should perhaps say something about the third.

I have been exasperated by, among other things, the repeated invocation by 'Team Anna' and their television cheerleaders of the name and legacy of Mohandas K. Gandhi. The distance between Anna Hazare and the Mahatma in terms of moral courage and political understanding is roughly equivalent to the distance, in terms of cricketing ability and understanding, between this writer and Sachin Tendulkar. In fact, Hazare is not even a 'Gandhian'. He has both preached and practiced violence, and has never seriously pursued such quintessentially Gandhian projects as the abolition of caste distinctions, women's emancipation, and Hindu-Muslim harmony.

The distance between Anna Hazare and Mahatma Gandhi can be judged if one juxtaposes Mukul Sharma's book *Green and Saffron* (the first serious study of the Ralegan Siddhi experiment) to Louis Fischer's classic *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. The distance between Hazare and Gandhianism can be judged if one visits the co-operatives and banks run in Gujarat by the Self-Employed Women's Association, whose founder, Ela Bhatt, has successfully nurtured ideals of

caste and gender equality, and religious pluralism, among lakhs and lakhs of previously sectarian Indians.

I have also been exasperated by the attitude of the Bharatiya Janata Party. Through 2011, the BJP undermined the dignity of Parliament by regularly disrupting its proceedings. Comments by senior BJP leaders endorsing Hazare left it unclear whether the principal Opposition party believed that it was the Ramlila Maidan, rather than Parliament, which should decide how laws are to be framed and when they are to be passed. Meanwhile, the sister organization of the BJP, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, aggressively supported Hazare's movement. (One hopes it is only by oversight that, in his recent speech in Bangalore, Hazare did not speak of the by no means insubstantial corruption promoted by the BJP State Government.)

Finally, I have been exasperated by the behaviour of the ruling dispensation in New Delhi. A young journalist told me that 'while Gandhi became a Mahatma through his own efforts, we in the media have made a village patriarch a Gandhi.' In fact, the Government have done their bit in inflating Anna Hazare's significance. After his first fast, five Cabinet Ministers met with five men nominated by Hazare in a 'Joint Drafting Committee'. In sanctioning this move, the Prime Minister placed this unelected activist above the Leader of the Opposition.

On the eve of Anna Hazare's second fast in New Delhi, the Government made the colossal error of sending him to Tihar Jail, and then, after a public outcry, releasing him. This elevated his status even further. When the fast eventually commenced, the media took over the job of reputation inflation, by repeatedly showing a split screen of Hazare on one side and the Prime Minister on the other.

This was a face-off with only one winner. For in the winter of 2010-11, the Prime Minister had stayed conspicuously silent while the Commonwealth Games and 2G scams broke. He had previously shielded corrupt Ministers; now, when a popular movement against corruption grew, he still would not do or say anything. This is a key reason behind Anna Hazare's appeal, that while the septugenerian on the sarkari side would do anything to stick on in office, this old man was, as it were, willing to stake his life for the nation. It is a mark of how desperately disappointing Dr Manmohan Singh's second term has been that it has allowed an authoritarian village reformer with little understanding of what Gandhi said, did, or meant to claim the mantle of the Mahatma.

When I expressed these serial disenchantments to the sociologist André Bételle, he remarked that while Anna Hazare had a right to be stupid, MP's and Ministers did not. As an ordinary citizen, Hazare could say what he wanted. However, the Opposition parties had betrayed their mandate by their contempt for Parliament. The Congress had undermined Parliament too (by dealing directly with Team Anna). Cabinet Ministers had behaved like boors and, at times, like brutes. And through the action or, more often, inaction, of its current incumbent, the office of Prime Minister had been most diminished of all.

Here, then, is my interim judgement on 2011—that in the year now ending, Indian democracy has been debased by an opportunistic and malevolent Opposition on the one side and a corrupt and shockingly incompetent Government on the other. I wish readers of this column a less bewildering and less exasperating 2012.

(published in the Hindustan Times, 24th December 2011)

### **Debating Anna Hazare**

On the 27th of August, the Telegraph newspaper published an article on Anna Hazare by Ramachandra Guha under the title A PATRIARCH FOR THE NATION?. The article sparked a debate between the author and the social worker Lalit Uniyal. The debate is reproduced below, for several reasons. The dialogue is without artifice; it grew naturally. Marxists might perceive an instance of the dialectic in operation, thesis to synthesis. Younger scholars might discover a model of courtesy in debate. And, hopefully, someone in Anna's entourage might notice it!

First, here is the original article itself:

About 20 years ago, I found myself in the same room as Anna Hazare, at a meeting organized by the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi. Mr Hazare was becoming known in environmental circles for the work he had done in his native village, Ralegan Siddhi. His successful programmes of watershed conservation and afforestation stood in stark contrast to the efforts of the state forest department, which had handed over vast tracts of virgin forests to industry. Moreover, whereas the forest department was hostile to community participation, identifying villagers as 'enemies of the forest', Hazare had energized peasants to care for and renew their natural environment. When Anna Hazare came into that Delhi meeting room of the early 1990s he wore the same dress as he does now. He exuded the same simplicity. But, as I recall, he spoke softly, even with some diffidence. He was not entirely at home in a hall filled with urban folks whose cultural, albeit not moral, capital, was far greater than his.

It is said that power and wealth make men younger. So, apparently, does the attention of television. As we become older, the rest of us grow less alert, less energetic, less combative. This law of biology Hazare seems now to have defied. For the man I now see on my screen is not the man I once saw in a seminar room in New Delhi. He challenges and taunts the government and its ministers, wagging his finger at the cameras. Once, Hazare was the voice and conscience of the village of Ralegan Siddhi; now he demands that he be seen as the saviour of the nation itself.

Some television channels claim that Anna Hazare represents the overwhelming bulk of Indians. Print, cyberspace and soundings on the street suggest a more complicated picture. Liberals worry about the dangers to policy reform contained in street agitations led by men whose perfervid

rhetoric undermines constitutional democracy. Dalits and backward castes see this as a reprise of the anti-Mandal agitation, led and directed by savarna activists.

To these political reservations may be added the caution of the empirical sociologist. The population of the Delhi metropolitan area is in excess of 10 million; yet at their height, the crowds in the Ramlila Maidan have never exceeded 50,000. In May 1998, 400,000 residents of Calcutta marched in protest against the Pokhran blasts. No one then said that ‘India stands against Nuclear Bombs’. Now, however, as television cameras endlessly show the same scenes at the same place, we are told that ‘India is for Anna’.

This said, it would be unwise to dismiss the resonance or social impact of the campaign led by Anna Hazare. It comes on the back of a series of scandals promoted by the present United Progressive Alliance government — Commonwealth Games, 2G, Adarsh, et al. The media coverage of these scandals, over the past year and more, has led to a sense of disgust against this government in particular, and (what is more worrying) against the idea of government in general. It is this moment, this mood, this anger and this sense of betrayal, that Anna Hazare has ridden on. Hence the transformation of a previously obscure man from rural Maharashtra into a figure of — even if fleetingly — national importance.

The success of Anna Hazare is explained in large part by the character of those he opposes. He appears to be everything the prime minister and his ministers are not — courageous, independent-minded, willing to stake his life for a principle. In an otherwise sceptical piece — which, among other things, calls Anna Hazare a “moral tyrant” presiding over a “comical anti-corruption opera” — the columnist C.P. Surendran writes that “a party that can’t argue its case against a retired army truck driver whose only strength really is a kind of stolid integrity and a talent for skipping meals doesn’t deserve to be in power”. These two strengths — honesty and the willingness to eschew food, and by extension, the material life altogether — shine in comparison with the dishonest and grasping men on the other side.

Large swathes of the middle class have thus embraced Anna Hazare out of disgust with Manmohan Singh’s government. That said, one must caution against an excessive identification with Anna Hazare. Hazare is a good man, perhaps even a saintly man. But his understanding remains that of a village patriarch.

The strengths and limitations of Anna Hazare are identified in *Green and Saffron*, a book by Mukul Sharma that shall appear later this year. Sharma is an admired environmental journalist, who did extensive fieldwork in Ralegan Siddhi. He was greatly impressed by much of what he saw. Careful management of water had improved crop yields, increased incomes, and reduced indebtedness. On the other hand, he found the approach of Anna Hazare “deeply brahmanical”. Liquor, tobacco, even cable TV were forbidden. Dalit families were compelled to adopt a vegetarian diet. Those who violated these rules — or orders — were tied to a post and flogged.

Sharma found that on Hazare's instructions, no panchayat elections had been held in the village for the past two decades. During state and national elections, no campaigning was allowed in Ralegan Siddhi. The reporter concluded that "crucial to this genuine reform experiment is the absolute removal from within its precincts of many of the defining ideals of modern democracy".

The sound-bites spontaneously offered by Anna Hazare in recent weeks do not inspire confidence. Emblematic here was his dismissal of the prime minister, Manmohan Singh, and of the government's pointman in its handling of the anti-corruption movement, Kapil Sibal. Hazare said that Dr Singh and Mr Sibal did not understand India because they had taken degrees at foreign universities.

As it happens, worthier men have had foreign degrees; among them, the two greatest social reformers of modern India, M.K. Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar.

Hazare claims that the last 64 years of political freedom have been utterly wasted ("chausutt saal mein humko sahi azaadi nahin mili hai"). The fact is that had it not been for the groundwork laid by the Constitution, and by visionaries like Nehru, Patel, Ambedkar, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and others, Dalits and women would not have equal rights under the law, nor would elections based on universal franchise be regularly and freely held.

Dalits and women were less-than-equal citizens in the raj of the British, and in the raj of Anna Hazare's much admired Shivaji Maharaj as well. Those other regimes did not have, either, constitutional guarantees for the freedom of movement, combination and expression. To be sure, there remains a large slippage between precept and practice. I have elsewhere called India a "fifty-fifty democracy". The jurist, Nani Palkhivala, once said the same thing somewhat differently: India, he suggested, is a second-class democracy with a first-class Constitution.

In the years since Palkhivala first made this remark, India may have become a third-class democracy. But the ideal remains, to match which one needs patient, hard work on a variety of fronts. Anna Hazare claims that the creation of a single lok pal will end 60 per cent to 65 per cent of corruption. That remark confuses a village with a nation. A benign (and occasionally brutal) patriarch can bring about improvements in a small community. But a nation's problems cannot be solved by a Super-Cop or Super-Sarpanch, even (or perhaps especially) if he be assisted (as the legislation envisages) by thousands of busybody and themselves corruptible inspectors.

Improving the quality and functioning of democratic institutions will require far more than a lok pal, whether jan or sarkari. We have to work for, among other things, changes in the law to make funding of elections more transparent, and to completely debar criminals from contesting elections; the Reform of political parties to make them less dependent on family and kin; the use of technology to make the delivery of social services less arbitrary and more efficient; the insulation of the bureaucracy and the police from political interference; the lateral entry of professionals into public service, and more. In striving for these changes one must draw upon the



experience, and expertise, of the very many Indians who share Hazare's idealism without being limited by his parochialism.

Next, here is Lalit Uniyal's response:

Dear Ram Bhai,

Thank you for sending your piece.

Of course you always write so well and persuasively, but I think I'll react to what you have to say via my reaction to Anna's 'victory'.

To have taken on the full might of the government and brought it to its knees, to have established the supremacy of the people over the state, and to have generated a national resolve to combat corruption – these are extraordinary achievements. There is also something deeply moving about Anna's readiness to lay down his life for his beliefs. These things make him a great man and a true hero in the eyes of the people. His movement is highly popular and has reached kasbas (small townships) and even villages.

But it does sometimes seem that he and his aides are driven by hatred of politicians rather than plain, simple love of the people of India. It does seem that he has his own notions – a perfect Lokpal bill, right to reject and right to recall representatives, etc. – which in one case may be unrealistic, and not necessarily all to the good in the other. We must realise that there are no perfect institutions. Similarly, our reformed electoral system should not lead to instability. We want electoral reforms so that good people can get elected; our aim ought not to be to find ways to harm the bad ones who still manage to get in. And so on in all other matters. We need to be constructive. This movement must seek to be wholly constructive. Therefore our criticism of it ought to be constructive too. The movement has its pitfalls but it also provides us a great opportunity for national regeneration. Let us highlight its pitfalls by all means, but let us also utilise its opportunities. The movement needs to be led more intelligently, with greater sobriety – with passion, yes, but passion tempered by reason.

Anna has his limitations. Every individual has his limitations. These limitations can be overcome in one way only – by involving larger numbers, by involving intellectuals of all shades, by the movement itself seeking to build a consensus or near consensus on vital national issues. Instead of Anna shooting off his specific programme of electoral reforms, it would be wiser for him to take up the issue of electoral reforms at the conceptual level first – have it debated, involve even the Election Commission, then arrive at a specific set of proposals and use the power of the movement to get the proposals passed by Parliament.

Surely there must be a way to make Anna and his aides understand that leading a mass movement is a huge responsibility. It must not be construed as an occasion for getting on one's

hobby horse. If it is to be a people's movement, more and more people must be involved in its decision-making processes. Anna and his aides should neither feel alone nor wish to be alone, especially with such enthusiastic support for him. He can add the entire country to his list of aides.

I believe that if the movement takes this path, it will become truly a national movement and will help us not indeed to become a great power (which is an absurd aim anyway) but to become a happier people, at peace with ourselves and our surroundings.

Therefore, in response to your piece, this is my central point – that it is written in too critical a vein; it would benefit if it were re-written with a more constructive end in view.

Regards,

Lalit Uniyal

Finally, Guha's response to the criticisms above:

Dear Lalit bhai,

Thank you for your mail – it is not only I who writes well and persuasively! Your criticisms are gently yet beautifully put. Two scholars whom I respect had similar reservations to yours. I quote them below:

1. 'Very nice piece, though personally I think a non-violent protest against a satanically corrupt state should have got a little more support in the essay from someone with your moral authority and stature in the public domain. Hazare's not the Mahatma, but he's asking for some basic concrete steps in the larger fight to eliminate corruption, and in return getting only vague assurances that will yield nothing concrete. If the state is forced to yield some ground to him, it will have yielded only because of his movement, not Aruna Roy and Co., whom they would have fobbed off for another fifteen years.'

2. 'I agree with what you say in your piece, as always written beautifully. Of course, Anna Hazare has his flaws – I am told that all young people have left Ralegan Siddhi thanks to his way of doing things. At the same time, he has managed to push politicians to move and hopefully soon create an institutional mechanism for tackling corruption. If he hadn't fasted, this would not have happened.'

I see that three of the people whose judgement I value most highly had similar reservations; all thought I was perhaps excessively sceptical and a little lofty. I stand chastened! I suppose the democrat in me was reacting to the excessive deification of a single person, and wanted thus to provide some context. I do hope that Anna's advisers act along the lines you suggest. Where however I would disagree with you is that I do not think a television driven movement can provide 'national regeneration'. There is a marked megalomaniac tendency among some of

Anna's closest advisers, stoked by television – and I do not believe he is immune from it himself. If the movement stays away from the media for the next few weeks and months and concentrates on precisely the outreach you recommend, it could have a lasting impact. Otherwise not.

With regards

Ram

The Telegraph

## **TRIBAL TRAGEDIES**

In August 2010—that is, exactly a year ago—Rahul Gandhi told a group of tribals in Orissa that he would be their soldier in New Delhi. There is no record of his having acted on that promise. The Dongria Konds of Niyamgiri forgotten, his attention has more recently been focused on the Jats of NOIDA, and other such groups that might help the Congress make a strong showing in the U. P. elections.

Rahul Gandhi's behaviour is characteristic of the political class as a whole, which—regardless of party or generation—has treated tribals with condescension. The neglect goes back to Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi worked hard to abolish untouchability, and harder to bring about Hindu-Muslim harmony. He inspired tens of thousands of women to enter public life. Somehow, however, the adivasis never figured seriously in the Mahatma's programmes of social reform. This failure was reproduced by his colleagues and successors in the Congress party.

Despite their neglect by the national movement, tribals were one of two groups recognized by the Constitution of India as needing special consideration. The other were the Dalits, whose problems were given great visibility by their own leaders, such as B. R. Ambedkar, and by upper-caste reformers such as Gandhi. As for the tribals, where the Congress had failed, it was activists like Jaipal Singh and Verrier Elwin who brought their problems to wider attention. Hence the reservation of seats in Parliament and of jobs in Government for adivasis as well as Dalits.

As we mark our sixty-fifth Independence Day, how many Indians, I wonder, recognize the fact that tribals have gained least and lost most from India being a free and democratic country? Viewed historically, the tribals have faced seven successive (and overlapping) tragedies:

First, they live in India's densest forests, along its fastest-flowing rivers, and atop its richest veins of iron ore and bauxite. As the country has industrialized, the tribals have lost their homes and livelihoods to logging projects, dams, and mines which are directed by and benefit more powerful social forces;

Second, there has never been an adivasi Ambedkar, a leader of pan-Indian significance who could give hope and inspiration to tribals everywhere;

Third, the tribals are demographically concentrated in a few hill districts, and hence do not constitute a vote bank whose voice can, at least symbolically, be attended to by the political class. There is a striking contrast here with Dalits (as well as Muslims), who are more evenly distributed across India, have a far greater impact on the outcome of state and national elections, and are hence treated with far greater respect by national parties;

Fourth, a large share of officers' jobs under the 'Scheduled Tribes' quota, as well as reserved seats in the more prestigious colleges, go to the tribals of the north-east, who have a greater facility with the English language as well as access to better schools. This geographical distortion in the distribution of benefits calls perhaps for a revision of the category of 'Scheduled Tribes', to privilege the adivasis of central India;

Fifth, since they are without adequate representation in the higher civil service and without a political voice anyway, the tribals are subject to harsh treatment by the officials of the forest, police, revenue, education and health departments, who are obliged by law to serve the adivasis but oriented in practice to harass and exploit them. One consequence of this, as the demographer Arup Maharatna has shown, is that while Dalits have poor access to education and health care, adivasis are even worse off in these respects;

Sixth, the livelihood skills of the tribals, based on an intimate knowledge of the natural environment, cannot be easily transferred to the industrial economy (here again, the Dalits are somewhat better placed, since their artisanal and craft traditions can be incorporated into some modern sectors).

Seventh, since, except for Santhali, tribal languages are not officially recognized, they are not taught in government schools. With the medium of instruction being a language not their own, tribal children are at a disadvantage from the time they enter school.

In the past two decades, to these seven continuing tragedies has been added an eighth—the rising influence of Maoist extremists in tribal areas. While presuming to be the protectors of the adivasis, the Maoists offer no solution to their problems. In fact, by escalating the level of violence, they intensify their suffering in the short and medium term. In any case, the revolutionaries have no long-term commitment to the adivasis, seeing them rather as a stepping-stone en route to the capture of state power.

There may even be a ninth tragedy—the relative invisibility of the tribal predicament in the so-called 'national' media. This media—both print and electronic—features intense debates on (among other matters) the problems of the Dalits and the predicament of the Muslims, on female foeticide and khap panchayats, on scams relating to telecom licenses and infrastructural projects.

These are all real problems, which must be discussed, and addressed. But so must the situation of the adivasis who lose their lands to mines and dams, the adivasis deprived of access to schools and hospitals, the adivasis who are ignored by the media and the political parties, the adivasis who are massively under-represented in the professional classes and in the upper reaches of the bureaucracy, the adivasis subject to violence by state and insurgent alike. The adivasis are the most vulnerable, the most victimized of Indians, a fact recognized by Rahul Gandhi on one day last year, this fleeting interest an advance on his political colleagues, who do not appear to have ever recognized this fact at all. (published in the Hindustan Times, 15th August 2011)

### **BAN THE BAN**

Earlier this year, the Gujarat Government banned a book on Mahatma Gandhi by an American writer. The book was not then available in India, and no one in Gujarat had read it. The ban, ordered by Chief Minister Narendra Modi, was on the basis of a tendentious news report and a still more tendentious book review.

After Mr. Modi announced his ban, the first instinct of the Government of India was to emulate him. Congress spokesmen called for a countrywide ban. The then Law Minister, Veerappa Moily, indicated that he would follow their lead. There was a spirit of competitive chauvinism abroad; how could the Congress allow a non-Congress politician to claim to be defending the reputation of the Mahatma?

In the event, the Government of India did not enforce a ban on the book. This was principally because of two quick, focused interventions by Rajmohan Gandhi and Gopalkrishna Gandhi. Both are grandsons of the Mahatma; both, besides, are scholars and public figures in their own right. Rajmohan and Gopalkrishna wrote signed articles in the press saying that a ban would be contrary to the spirit of Gandhi, a man who encouraged and promoted debate; it would also call into question India's claims to be the world's largest democracy.

A ban makes news; the withdrawal of a ban does not. Gandhi scholars in particular, and Indians in general, owe Rajmohan and Gopalkrishna a debt of gratitude, for pressurizing the Government to allow the free circulation of Joseph Lelyveld's *The Great Soul* in twenty-seven states of the country. It remains illegal to own or possess a copy of the book in the twenty-eighth state of the Union, which happens to be Gandhi's own. By banning the book before it was available, Narendra Modi thought he could camouflage his sectarian leanings in the protective cloak of the Mahatma's pluralism. In the event, once the Government of India—bowing to the sensible advice of Gandhi's grandsons—allowed the free circulation of the book, the fact that it is not yet legally available in Gujarat only exposes the insularity and xenophobia of that state's Chief Minister.

Sadly, the bravery (and decency) of Gandhi's grandsons has not been emulated by defenders or descendants of some other great men of modern India. Consider the fate, within India, of a biography of Sri Aurobindo written by Peter Heehs. Heehs is a real scholar, the author of several substantial works of history (among them *The Bomb in Bengal*). What's more, he was for many years in charge of the archives in the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry.

In 2008 Columbia University Press in New York published Peter Heehs's *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*. The product of a lifetime of scholarship, its empirical depth and analytical sharpness is unlikely to be surpassed. For Heehs knows the documentary evidence on and around Aurobindo's life better than anyone else. He has a deep knowledge of the political and spiritual worlds in which his subject moved and by which he was shaped.

Alas, this remarkable life of a remarkable Indian cannot be read in India. This is because of an injunction on its sale asked for by self-professed devotees of Aurobindo, and granted by a hyper-active High Court in Orissa. Heehs's book is respectful but not reverential. He salutes Aurobindo for his contributions to the freedom struggle. Before Aurobindo, writes Heehs, 'no one dared to speak openly of independence; twenty years later, it became the movement's accepted goal'. He praises Aurobindo's contributions to literature and philosophy. However, Heehs is gently skeptical of the claim that Aurobindo possessed supernatural powers. 'To accept Sri Aurobindo as an avatar is necessarily a matter of faith', he writes, adding that 'matters of faith quickly become matters of dogma'.

This understated, unexceptionable statement drove the dogmatic followers of Aurobindo bananas. Some devotees filed a case in the Orissa High Court, restraining the Indian publisher from circulating the book in India. Other devotees filed a case in a Tamil Nadu court, seeking the revocation of Peter Heehs's visa and his extradition from this country. By these (and other) acts, the contemporary keepers of Aurobindo's flame showed themselves to be far less courageous than the grandsons of Gandhi. Is their icon so fragile that he can be destroyed or even damaged by a single, scholarly, book?

Consider, next, the case of *The Polyester Prince*, a book about Dhirubhai Ambani published in 1998 by an Australian journalist named Hamish McDonald. This was no work of scholarship—slight in weight and substance, it was yet noteworthy for its documentation of the intimate connections between a successful entrepreneur on the one side and senior politicians and Government officials on the other. The book was not sold in India—for reasons never made clear, but which certainly had something to do with the thin skins of the subject's descendants.

In fact, it was almost impossible to get a copy of *The Polyester Prince* outside India as well. Someone—we may speculate who or whom—had apparently bought up and pulped the remaining stock. The few available copies were selling on internet sites for upwards of US\$500 a copy. Last year, the book was issued in a new edition, and with a new title. Now called *Ambani and Sons*, it contained some fresh chapters on the next generation of the family. However, many

critical references to politicians and to the Ambanis themselves, present in the original edition, had been dropped. This was the price asked for by an Indian publisher in exchange for the rights to distribute the book in this country.

As these cases illustrate, the Republic of India bans books with a depressing frequency. Three factors promote this culture of banning. First, the descendants or devotees of biographical subjects are often too nervous or insecure to have them discussed with objectivity and rigour. Second, these fanatical or insecure followers have found an ally in the courts. Although the Supreme Court has tended to act on the side of the freedom of expression, lower courts have been less wise. Judges who are malleable or publicity-hungry pass injunctions forbidding the free circulation of books and works of art. Few petitioners have the time, or money, or energy, to wait and fight till the case reaches the Supreme Court (a process that can take years). A ban once invoked is therefore rarely revoked.

The third and most significant reason for the proliferation of bans is the pusillanimity of our political class. An early example was the ban on Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* by Rajiv Gandhi's Government in 1989. As the historian Dharma Kumar wrote at the time, the ban was 'a sign of the Government's weakness. In a secular state blasphemy should not in itself be a cognizable offence; the President of India is not the defender of any nor of all faiths.'

In subsequent years, governments and politicians of all stripes have recklessly banned books, films, and paintings that simply express a point of view. The Left Front in Bengal promoted a ban on the novels of the brave Bangladeshi writer Tasleema Nasreen; Narendra Modi has banned a book on Jinnah as well as at least one film by Aamir Khan; the party of Sharad Pawar in Maharashtra was instrumental in a ban on a scholarly book on Shivaji; rampaging bands of Hindutvawadis destroyed paintings by M. F. Hussain and, by filing case after case against him in the courts, forced him into exile.

It is a sorry tale, this tale of cowardice in the face of intimidation. Lower courts and even some High Courts have been accomplices in this process of the stifling of free speech. So too have been politicians of all parties and Governments. Indian democrats may take solace in the few exceptions: these being the institution of the Supreme Court, and those public-spirited public figures, Rajmohan and Gopalkrishna Gandhi.

## **DELHI DELUSIONS**

A Tamil economist, the late S. Guhan, used to say that Delhi was a capital in search of a country. I was reminded of that remark during the fortnight of 29 May to 11 June 2011. In that fortnight, if one watched the 'national' channels or read the 'national' newspapers, one would think all of India was involved in one way or the other with the ideas and practices of a certain Baba Ramdev. Many news bulletins were entirely given over to what Ramdev said or did not

say, to how his utterances—and silences—were interpreted by his followers and adversaries. To a foreigner or visitor from outer space, these reports would have conveyed the impression that the citizens of India, all twelve hundred million of them, considered Ramdev and his tamasha to be of all-consuming interest.

I spent part of that fortnight in Karnataka; the other part in Tamil Nadu. In both states, the overwhelming majority of the rural population were ignorant of Ramdev and his doings. They went about their work—farming, labouring, trading, studying, sleeping. Most city dwellers were also in the dark about Ramdev and his activities. Perhaps in Chennai and Bangalore, sections of the English-speaking middle class were drawn into the tamasha, accustomed as they are to watching the news in the hours after returning from work and before going to bed. However, the less privileged residents of Bangalore and Chennai were, like their rural brethren, ignorant of or indifferent towards Ramdev, his friends, and his critics.

Ramdev's eulogies to Hindu culture, his distaste for foreign ideas and foreign individuals, resonate with Hindutva ideology. The major leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party support his current campaign; many RSS activists are involved in it. Now Karnataka is a state ruled by the BJP, while Tamil Nadu is ruled by a party whose Chief Minister has shown pronounced Hindutva tendencies. And yet the vast majority of these states' residents lived, laboured, loved, and sometimes died during that fortnight of 29 May-11 June, in complete ignorance of Ramdev's fast at the Ramlila Maidan.

One would expect the states of the east and north-east to be disinterested in Ramdev and his doings. He has few followers in West Bengal, still fewer in Meghalaya or Nagaland. But as I found out that fortnight, his activities do not evoke much interest in Karnataka or Tamil Nadu either. This state of affairs, so evident on the ground, was apparently kept hidden from the anchors in the television studios in New Delhi.

The national media's parochial biases were manifest in their coverage of the fast, and of its aftermath. The police action on the night of June 4th/5th was indefensible. The police knew beforehand that what was advertised as a yoga camp would become a combative discourse about political corruption. Ramdev had made this perfectly clear. The correct action, under the law, was to have withdrawn permission before the camp began, or else to have waited, and intervened only if the camp became seriously violative of public order.

The action of the police deserved, and received, widespread condemnation. What was less easy to understand was the response of the Delhi media, which endlessly ran shots of policemen with lathis at the Ramlila Maidan, and then, also endlessly, carried commentary on those events by foolish or self-interested parties, who compared what happened that night to the Emergency of 1975 and even to the Jallianawala Bagh massacre.

If the obsession with Ramdev's fast manifested the parochialism of the so-called national media, the discussion of its aftermath manifested its complete lack of political judgement. By the



standards of police brutality, what happened that night at the Ramlila Maidan was a dinner party, a satsang even. Over the past five years, the police in Chattisgarh have regularly burnt homes and crops, and attacked villagers whose only crime is that they do not wholly endorse the State Government's promotion of the armed vigilantes known as Salwa Judum. Yet no paper published out of Delhi has ever run an example of such police brutality on its front page, no channel operating out of Delhi has ever made it a main headline on a news bulletin.

I speak of police brutalities in Chattisgarh because I have some knowledge of them myself. Other scholars and writers could speak, with greater authority, of police atrocities in the tribal belt of Orissa, or in Manipur. In the action at the Ramlila Maidan, one woman named Rajbala was grievously injured. That was sad, a tragedy even. It is as well that public attention is brought to bear on it. But surely equal attention must be paid to women injured or killed by callous or over-zealous policemen in other parts of India? There are hundreds of Rajbalas in the states of Chattisgarh, Orissa, and Manipur, not one of whom has ever been mentioned by name in a front page of a Delhi newspaper or in a headline of a television news bulletin.

My closest lady friend (that is to say, my wife) points out that in this respect Delhi is to the rest of India what the United States of America is to the rest of the world. Some 60,000 American servicemen died in the war waged by the U.S. against the Vietnamese people—each one has his name engraved on a memorial in Washington. Perhaps one-and-a-half million Vietnamese died in that war; they remain nameless, at least in America. Even today, the death of one American soldier makes as much news in the New York Times as the death of several dozen Iraqi or Afghan civilians.

Some years ago, the Delhi media was preoccupied for weeks on end with the murder of a lady named Jessica Lal. Like the injury to Rajbala, that was a crime, whose perpetrators had to be held accountable before the law. But why is the same attention not devoted, by the press and the legal system alike, to the beating up and killing of women by the police in other states of the Union? Is it because the life of a citizen of Delhi is worth as much as the lives of five hundred or a thousand Indians who do not live in Delhi?

The media in the nation's capital is very largely disconnected from other parts of the country. Someone who knows this well is Baba Ramdev himself. Ramdev says he is fighting a battle against corruption. For this, at least one fast in Delhi made sense, for the current UPA Government is arguably the most corrupt Central Government in India's history. However, political corruption is ubiquitous in other parts of India as well. Without question the most corrupt state Government is that of Karnataka, where mafia dons are Ministers, having bought their way to power on the backs of millions of tonnes of iron ore illegally mined on forest land and illegally exported without paying taxes and by violating environmental and labour standards. The scale of their loot is best expressed in a remark made by the great civil rights lawyer, K. G. Kannabiran, who, shortly before he died, said that compared to the mining dons of Bellary, Nadir Shah was a mere pickpocket.

If Ramdev comes to Bangalore and starts a fast against political corruption I will be at his side. So will many other residents of Karnataka. But Ramdev will not come here, for three reasons. First, he speaks effectively only in Hindi, a language few in this state understand. Second, for all his protestations about being non-political, he is actually very close to the Sangh Parivar, and does not wish to embarrass a Government run by the BJP. Third, he knows that a fast in Bangalore will not attract anything like the same interest from the ‘national’ media as a fast in Delhi, even if it be conducted for exactly the same purpose.

### **THIRTEEN WAYS TO CLEANSE THE SYSTEM**

In an article published fifty years ago, the great Indian democrat Chakravarthi Rajagopalachari deplored ‘the unconscionable and grievous expenditure on elections, which gives overwhelming advantage to money-power..’ Rajaji argued that ‘elections now are largely, so to say, private enterprise, whereas this is the one thing that should be first nationalized.’ Towards this end, he recommend that the Government issue voter cards, take votes not at fixed destinations but at mobile booths that went from home to home and hamlet to hamlet, and provide state funding to parties and contestants.

In the decades since Rajaji wrote, money-power has become even more pervasive and influential. A candidate for Parliament requires crores of rupees to fight an election. These costs are obtained through party funds, which rest not (as they should) on membership fees and small voluntary donations, but on commissions creamed off government contracts, and on bribes given by industrialists to whom the parties have granted favours. The funds provided to (or gathered by) contestants are then used to seek to bribe voters. The money spent in fighting elections is recovered many-fold in case the party or contestant wins.

In Rajaji’s time, a minority of politicians (perhaps 20% or so) were corrupt. And virtually none were criminals. Now, certainly less than 20% of politicians in power are completely honest; and somewhat more than 20% have criminal records. That said, the electoral system itself is relatively transparent. Sterling work by successive Election Commissioners—such as T. N. Seshan, J. M. Lyngdoh, N. Gopalaswami and S. Y. Qureshi—have largely put an end to the practice—widespread in the 1970s and 1980s—of capturing booths, doctoring ballot papers, and ensuring that those who were not likely to vote in your favour were kept away from the electoral process. Also on the positive side, voter turn-out remains high, far higher, in fact, than in older and otherwise more mature democracies. Besides, the poor vote in larger numbers than the middle-class and the rich.

Indian elections, then, are by no means a farce; but they are surely in need of reform. They need to be made independent of money-power, and less captive to the interests of crooks and criminals. Recognizing this, the Ministry of Law and the Election Commission have been holding a series of meetings in different parts of India, soliciting views on how best to reform the

electoral system. Asked to speak at the meeting in Bangalore, I took as my manifesto (the word is inescapable) a submission prepared by the Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR), a remarkable organization that has single-handedly made electoral malpractice and the criminalization of politics topics of national debate. (It was a Public Interest Litigation filed by the founding members of ADR that resulted in a Supreme Court judgement making mandatory the declaration of assets and criminal records of all those seeking to contest Assembly and Parliamentary elections.)

The note submitted by the ADR to the Ministry of Law and the Election Commission makes twenty-seven recommendations in all. These are listed in detail on the ADR website. I will here highlight thirteen recommendations, which I shall divide into two categories—those that are immediately practicable, and can be put in place at once; and those that are highly desirable, and can perhaps be tested first in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014 and then implemented in subsequent Parliamentary and Assembly elections.

Seven proposals made by the ADR that can be implemented with immediate effect are:

1. Barring criminals from politics: A person charged with serious offences like murder, rape, kidnapping, or extortion, against whom charges have been framed by the police or the courts and which are punishable by sentences exceeding two years imprisonment, should be prohibited from contesting elections. To prevent vendetta by political opponents, the law can specify that such action will be taken only if the case and charges were filed six or perhaps even nine months before the date of the election which the person wishes to contest;
2. Sources of income: Along with the declaration of assets and liabilities (now mandatory), candidates for state and national elections should also make public their yearly income and its sources;
3. Appointments of Election Commissioners: At the national level, this should be done by a multi-party committee consisting of the Prime Minister, the leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India. Likewise, State Election Commissioners should be chosen by a committee comprising the Chief Minister, the leader of the Opposition, the Assembly Speaker, and the Chief Justice of the relevant High Court. Further, to obviate bias and harassment, the Chief Election Commissioner of the State should be a person from outside the state cadre;
4. Provision for negative voting: The Electronic Voting Machines, while listing the names and affiliations of candidates, should have, as a final option, 'None of the above';
5. Bar on post-retirement jobs: All Election Commissioners should be barred from accepting government posts of any kind for a period of five years after their retirement, and from joining a political party for a further five years;

6. Financial transparency: It should be made mandatory for political parties to declare accounts annually, indicating their sources of funding, patterns of expenditure, etc.;

7. Curbs on Publicity at Public Expenses: Six months prior to the expiry of the House, the government should be forbidden from taking out advertisements in the media trumpeting their achievements (real or imagined);

Six further proposals made by the Association for Democratic Reforms, which can be made operational in the next few years are:

The winning margin of candidates should be at least one vote more than 50% of those cast. If no candidate gets a majority of votes, then the two top candidates in a constituency can ‘run-off’ against one another;

2. Elections should be funded by the state. The mechanics of this process have to be carefully worked out, to establish how much money is allocated to state parties, how much to national parties, how much to independent candidates, etc. But surely a committee composed of a selection of India’s many world-class economists can work out a formula that is both efficient and equitable;

3. The internal reform of political parties such that they have (a) regular elections (based on secret ballots); (b) term limits for office bearers;

4. The classification of political parties as public authorities, so that their finances and other activities come under the provision of the Right to Information Act;

5. The prompt detection of those who bribe voters by gifts of alcohol, televisions, etc., and their punishment by having their candidacy set aside;

6. The provision of annual reports to constituents by MP’s and MLA’s.

In recent months, the issue of political corruption has dominated the headlines—from the Commonwealth Games through the 2G scandal and the mining and real estate scams on to the controversy over the Lokpal Bill. Public discussion has been high on indignation and low on constructive proposals for reform. The document prepared by the ADR is an excellent starting point to move the debate from rhetoric to substance, from talk to action. For, to cleanse the election system is to cleanse the political class, and thereby, the process of governance itself.

## **POWER WOMEN**

A remarkable yet perhaps under-appreciated fact about Indian politics today is the influence, at the very top, of women. The most powerful individual in the country is a woman. The most powerful individual in the country’s largest state is a woman. The leader of the

Opposition in the Lok Sabha is a woman. In two weeks time, the most powerful individual in the State of West Bengal will certainly be a woman, and the most powerful individual in the State of Tamil Nadu will quite possibly be a woman.

This is an extraordinary conjunction, especially when one considers the historic oppression of women in South Asia down the ages. India's major religions, Hinduism and Islam, are in scriptural and practical terms deeply inhospitable to the emancipation of women, to the emergence of individual women as independent actors who can take their own decisions about how to live their life (rather than having these decisions taken for them by fathers, brothers, or husbands). And yet, here we have the policies of the country as a whole, and of several massive states within it, being shaped by women. Hundreds of millions of Indian men are now having their fate and future determined by those whom they have traditionally regarded as being subservient to them.

How does one explain the rise to power and influence of Sonia Gandhi, Mayawati, Sushma Swaraj, Jayalalithaa, and Mamata Bannerjee? The cynic may claim that except for the last-named, all have had their path smoothed by male patrons or family members. Had Sonia Gandhi not been Rajiv Gandhi's widow, she would not have become President of the Congress. Mayawati and Jayalalithaa were the protégés and anointed successors, respectively, of Kanshi Ram and M. G. Ramachandran, the founders of the political formations these ladies now head, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. Sushma Swaraj was supported in her early years in politics by her husband, the former socialist leader, Swaraj Kaushal, while her recent rise in the Bharatiya Janata Party has been aided by male patrons, most crucially perhaps the Reddy brothers of Karnataka.

(Mamata Bannerjee's career in politics owes much less to male patronage. In fact, she came to prominence through challenging powerful men—first, the anti-Congress stalwart Jayaprakash Narayan, on whose car she stamped and danced in 1974, and then, the Communist stalwart Somnath Chatterjee, whom she defeated in a Lok Sabha election in the Jadavpur constituency of Calcutta in 1984.)

The scholar may answer (or temper) the cynic by arguing that Sonia, Mayawati and company are the beneficiaries not of this or that individual, but of a long historical process, led and shaped by several generations of social reformers. In the early 19th century, Rammohan Roy responded to the challenge of Christian missionaries by campaigning for the abolition of sati and by arguing that in moral and intellectual terms women were at least the equal of men. In Roy's wake came Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jotiba Phule and D. K. Karve, who championed women's education; Mahatma Gandhi, who brought women into the freedom struggle; and Jawaharlal Nehru and B. R. Ambedkar, who insisted that women get the vote at the same time as men (in the West, they obtained the vote decades later), and who rewrote personal and family laws to allow most Indian women to own and inherit property and to choose their marriage partners.

Roy excepted, these male reformers were stimulated, challenged, aided and provoked by their female counterparts. The state of Maharashtra in particular produced some brilliant and very influential feminists, among them Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde. From the South came such remarkable women as Ammu Swaminadhan, Dr Muthulakshmi Reddy, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya. These feminists helped transform social mores and change state laws, so as to permit the greater participation of women in the economy, in education, in the arts, and in politics.

History and family ties have played their part, but so, too, has the character of these particular individuals. It helped Sonia Gandhi that she was the wife of one Prime Minister and the daughter-in-law of another, but these connections would have come to naught without her own determination and courage, which saw her bring her party back from the dead to a position of dominance. Both Mayawati and Jayalalithaa have faced, and overcome, vicious and vindictive male opponents. The former has had the additional handicap of being a Dalit in a country still subject to the cultural hegemony of the upper castes, the latter of being a Brahmin in a political climate soaked in anti-Brahminism. The Hindu right is nothing if not reactionary and patriarchal, attitudes which Sushma Swaraj has had to negotiate and combat. And in some ways Mamata Bannerjee's journey has been the toughest of all, for she has had to fight, in district after district if not para by para, the rule of the wholly male dadas of the long-entrenched Communist Party of India (Marxist).

The success, in political terms, of these five women is manifest. Ironically, though, women continue to be marginal in parties and regions where one might have thought them to have enjoyed more influence. Communists the world over claim to stand for gender equality. Why then is there no significant woman leader of the CPI(M) in either Kerala or West Bengal? Adivasi culture has traditionally allowed women greater freedom; yet one cannot easily think of an important adivasi woman politician. The tribal and Christian communities of the north-east have traditionally accorded more dignity to women than Hindu or Muslim communities; why then do only men become Chief Ministers in Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal, Mizoram, etc.? Unlike Hinduism and Islam, Sikhism grants scriptural equality to women; why does only one woman become Chief Minister of Punjab, and that for a brief, abbreviated term?

(One must also note that there is not a single Muslim woman leader of consequence anywhere in India. While perhaps easier to explain in sociological terms, this deficiency is nonetheless to be deplored, and, if possible, remedied.)

The rise to power of Sonia, Sushma, Mamata, Mayawati and Jayalalithaa has also to be set off against the continuing discrimination against women in Indian society. Female foeticide, dowry deaths, khap panchayats, unwritten rules which militate against women becoming vice chancellors of major universities and editors of major newspapers—these are the deep and poisonous residues of history, which generations of reformers have been unsuccessful in removing.

Finally, one must note that the five most powerful women in India have not always used their power wisely or well. Sonia Gandhi has promoted a culture of sycophancy that has inhibited Congress regimes from responding effectively to the challenges of governance. Mayawati and Jayalalithaa have pronounced authoritarian tendencies. Mamata Bannerjee is, to put it politely, temperamental; her frequent changes of mood, and her lack of interest in policy matters, do not bode well for the Government and State she is about to take charge of. Sushma Swaraj's dependence on the mafia dons of Bellary seriously undermines her personal and political credibility.

The rise of Sonia, Sushma, Mamata, Mayawati and Jayalalithaa does not thus herald a 'Stree Raj', or even a new age of gender equality. Still, that in a society and culture so steeped in discrimination against women, these five individuals have come to exercise so much influence is both striking and surprising. Whatever the reasons for their rise—personal (their courage and drive), or historical (the impact of generations of reformers), or political (the advent of universal adult franchise, where a woman's vote equals a man's)—and whatever its consequences, the phenomena itself is noteworthy, and merits an appreciation, however qualified.

### **A QUESTION OF ENGLISH**

In 1905 and 1906, Mohandas Gandhi, his wife, and their children shared a home in Johannesburg with an English couple, Henry and Millie Polak. Later, writing of their life together, Gandhi recalled that 'Polak and I had often very heated discussions about the desirability or otherwise of giving the children an English education. It has always been my conviction that Indian parents who train their children to think and talk in English from their infancy betray their children and their country. They deprive them of the spiritual and social heritage of the nation, and render them to that extent unfit for the service of the country. Having these convictions, I made a point of always talking to my children in Gujarati. Polak never liked this. He thought I was spoiling their future. He contended, with all the love and vigour at his command, that, if children were to learn a universal language like English from their infancy, they would easily gain considerable advantage over others in the race of life. He failed to convince me.'

Gandhi adds that while he insisted on his children speaking at home in Gujarati, and learning through that language, 'they naturally became bilingual, speaking and writing English with fair ease, because of daily contact with a large circle of English friends, and because of their stay in a country where English was the chief language spoken.'

The private debate between Gandhi and Polak has had very many public echoes down the decades. In the 1920s, Gandhi and Tagore argued in print about whether a love for the English language betrayed a colonized mind-set. The Mahatma thought it did, whereas the poet, a

prophet of a rooted cosmopolitanism, argued that Indians could glory in the illumination of lamps lit in languages and cultures other than their own.

After independence, the battle between these positions was truly joined, when the brilliant, maverick socialist Rammanohar Lohia launched and led an ‘Angrezi Hatao Andolan’, a movement to banish English from the face of India. (With a splendid but also somewhat malicious sense of timing, he chose the occasion of a visit by the Queen of England to intensify the agitation.) Lohia was answered in turn by Tamil politicians and intellectuals, who feared that in the absence of English, Hindi-speakers would exercise a sort of colonialist dominance over the southern, western, and eastern parts of India. Thus Hindi signs were defaced across Tamil Nadu by followers of E. V. Ramaswami ‘Periyar’—a leader as brilliant and as maverick as Lohia. Meanwhile, Periyar’s former adversary, C. Rajagopalachari, now joined him in opposing Hindi and in promoting English as the language of communication between different parts of India and between India and the world. To the argument that English was a foreign, even an imperialist, language, Rajaji answered that since the Goddess Saraswati had given birth to all the languages of humankind, we could and should claim English as our own.

The debate continues. In Karnataka, for example, many prominent intellectuals—among them the novelist U. R. Anantha Murthy—argue that a child must speak and learn exclusively in her mother tongue until she enters high school, lest she become totally disconnected from her social and spiritual roots. (Anantha Murthy is an admirer of Gandhi and a former disciple of Lohia, but, withal, very much his own man, who makes the argument with a distinctive flair and originality.) On the other side, Dalit activists suggest that the promotion of Kannada is an upper-class ploy to keep them away from the fruits of modern learning. They say that once the Brahmins denied them access to Sanskrit; now, the descendants of those Brahmins wish to deny the Dalits access to the modern language of power and privilege, namely, English.

This subaltern endorsement of the foreign language has taken a most interesting form in north India, where the writer-activist Chandra Bhan Prasad has decided to build a temple dedicated to the ‘Goddess English’ in his own home state of Uttar Pradesh. Described in the Wall Street Journal as ‘a bit of a maverick’ (he is also, I might add, brilliant) Prasad believes that the Dalits can achieve emancipation via a deeper and fuller engagement with English.

A century after Gandhi and Polak debated the question in Johannesburg, arguments about the relevance of English to India and Indians continues. The debate has moved on, of course, since society and history have moved on too. One might foreground three significant changes since Gandhi’s time. First, there are now far more inter-community marriages, particularly among the middle and upper classes. And if a Gujarati marries a Tamil, or a Bengali weds a Malayali, then the default language of their children, and of the family as a whole, tends to become English. Second, although Britannia no longer rules the waves, English continues to be the major global language, its pre-eminence a consequence of America having replaced Great Britain as the great imperial power of the age. Whether spoke in the Queen’s diction or in its American or other



variants, over most of the world English thus remains the language of choice for communication between people of different nationalities.

The third change is, in the Indian context, arguably the most significant. This that there is now a real hunger for English among the poor. As many readers of this column will know, domestic servants are determined that their children will not follow them into their profession; and recognize that the best way to escape hereditary servitude is for their own children to learn the language of mobility and opportunity, which of course is English. The desire to learn English thus runs deep among all castes and communities. Poor Muslims are as keen to learn the language as are poor Dalits or adivasis.

Whether one approves of it or not, this rush to learn English is unstoppable. Rammanohar Lohia and his followers have lost the battle to banish English from the imagination or learning experience of the Indian child. That said, one might still wish for a sort of historic compromise between the positions articulated by Gandhi and Polak. We live in a land of a quite extraordinary diversity of linguistic and literary traditions. And yet in practice we tend to privilege one language at the expense of all the others. That so many middle and upper class Indians speak only English is a shame; that so many subaltern and working class Indians do not have access to decent education in English is also a shame.

As for Gandhi's children, despite their father's insistence that they speak and learn only in Gujarati, they willy-nilly picked up the lingua franca of South Africa, which also fortuitously was the lingua franca of the world. In the linguistic enclaves that Indians live in, the promotion of bilingualism and multilingualism is certainly more difficult. It is easy enough for a child of the elite to acquire a smattering of Hindi (or Marathi or Kannada) phrases; how much more enriching would it be for him to learn the language well enough to read widely in its literature. By the same token, children from subaltern families are constrained by money and class from acquiring more than a functional knowledge of English.

Gandhi is not known to have been a model father, but by the accident of circumstance in at least this respect his children turned out to be more fortunate than other Indians. Their bilingualism came naturally, with the language of the home being supplemented by the language of the country they lived in. In contemporary India, on the other hand, a meaningful and enduring bilingualism remains out of reach of the vast majority of citizens.

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## LEADER AND FOLLOWERS

Returning to Bangalore after a fortnight on the road, I discovered that while I was away my Chief Minister had acquired a new wardrobe. I knew B. S. Yediyurappa to dress always in white trousers and white shirts, but now, on hoardings that peppered the highway from the airport into town, I saw him clad in a grey suit with pink tie, advertising his government's achievements (real and imagined) in economic and social development. The transformation was more than sartorial. Where posters of a few months ago had only his face, with those of national BJP leaders (say Vajpayee, Advani, Gadkari) alongside, the pictures now featured him alone, confidently striding towards the viewer.

I had flown into Bangalore from Ahmedabad, but had I come in from elsewhere in the country I would have reached the same conclusion—namely, that Mr. Yediyurappa had taken Mr Narendra Modi as his role model. That man had also lately exchanged his kurta for a business suit; more substantively, that man sought to present himself as the face of Gujarat, indeed, as Gujarat itself. Having domesticated the challenge of the Reddy brothers, having waited out the press revelations of his own land dealings, Mr Yediyurappa was now in a position to represent himself as, so to say, Karnataka personified.

Mr Modi's example is obvious, but Mr Yediyurappa may also have been influenced, at one remove, by the self-positioning of two other Chief Ministers of his party, Shivraj Singh Chauhan in Madhya Pradesh and Raman Singh in Chattisgarh. Like Mr Modi, they too do not currently face any serious challenge within their party or outside it. They control the administration completely, and shape the public debate within their state in a manner of their choosing.

These four BJP Chief Ministers seek to be authoritative. So too do some Chief Ministers from other parties, such as Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh, Nitish Kumar in Bihar, and Pawan Chamling in Sikkim. Remarkably, there is not a single Chief Minister from India's greatest and oldest party who can be thought of in these terms, as being, without question, the unchallenged leader of his or her state. Why is this so? And what are its consequences?

The answer to the first question is evident—it is because the High Command in Delhi decides who shall be its leader (or, more accurately perhaps, its follower) in the different states of the Union. As for the consequences, these are manifest in the steady decline of the Congress in parts of India where it once was the natural party of rule. Who, twenty years ago, could have thought that the Congress would be in such a pathetic state in Karnataka? Or in Gujarat? Or, perhaps especially, in Madhya Pradesh?

To be sure, the BJP leaders I mentioned have each led deeply flawed administrations. Yediyurappa's Government has perhaps been the most corrupt ever seen in Karnataka. Narendra Modi cannot escape the stigma of having failed to stop, and arguably even encouraged, the riots of 2002. Raman Singh has promoted a vigilante group that has destroyed an entire district and consolidated the Naxalites. Shivraj Singh Chauhan has, under the influence of the RSS,

interfered with school and college curricula, introducing poisonous ideas that are antithetical to the pluralism enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

There is also a thin line between being authoritative and being authoritarian, a line that both Mayawati and Narendra Modi (to name no others) have crossed from time to time. Still, there is no gainsaying the fact that the absence of vigorous, credible, state-level leaders has damaged the Congress in very many states of the Union. Whereas the BJP and other parties clearly project their Chief Ministerial candidate before an election, the Congress waits for the results to come in before making its choice clear. Its recent reverses in Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and other states suggest that this strategy is leading to a widespread disenchantment with the party.

Things were once otherwise. In Jawaharlal Nehru's time, the Congress had strong, capable, and very focused Chief Ministers—among them S. Nijalingappa in Karnataka (then known as Mysore), K. Kamaraj in Tamil Nadu (then Madras), B. C. Roy in West Bengal, and Y. B. Chavan in Maharashtra. They successfully won elections, and ran governments. Now, in states like Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh, there is no one, identifiable, Congress leader. Five or six senior men jostle for position, their precedence varying from month to month depending on the winks and nods of the High Command. In other states the situation is even more dire. There is thus not a single Congress leader of substance in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu or West Bengal, not a single leader who can be relied upon even to safely and regularly win his or her own seat, still less to canvass successfully for other Congress candidates.

The personal charisma of the Nehru-Gandhi family is itself fading; in any case, it cannot compensate for the decline of substantive leadership at the provincial level. In the aftermath of the military victory of 1971, Indira Gandhi could win state elections across India and then anoint Chief Ministers of her choice. Between 1998 and 2006, when she was perceived as a selfless woman who had come out of seclusion to revive the party and serve her country, Sonia Gandhi could also influence the outcome of state elections in her party's favour. Those times are now past. A federal polity demands that parties be so structured that state-level leaders emerge from below, rather than be imposed from above.

## **BEYOND TELANGANA**

The United States has less than half as many citizens as the Republic of India, yet almost twice as many states. The map of that country has been drawn and re-drawn very many times in the course of its history. On 1st January 1800, for example, the U. S. had only sixteen states; fifty years later, the number had jumped to thirty. When the nineteenth century ended there were forty-five states in the union. Oklahoma was added in 1907, while Arizona and New Mexico were incorporated in 1912. Hawaii and Alaska came on board as late as 1959.

To be sure, while some of these states were carved out of existing ones, most were added on as the American colonists expanded their reach and influence to the west and south of the continent. On the other hand, the Republic of India is constituted out of territory left behind by the British. After the integration of the princely states was completed in 1948, no new land has been acquired by the Indian Union. Still, the American example is not entirely irrelevant, for it shows that large nations take shape over long periods of time. It may only be after a century or more after a nation's founding that its political geography settles into a stable equilibrium, with its internal divisions and sub-divisions finally and firmly established.

When India became independent in 1947, it inherited the provincial divisions of the Raj, these a product of accident rather than historical or social logic. At once, a clamour began to create states based on linguistic communities. The Telugu-speakers of the Madras Presidency wanted an Andhra Pradesh. The Marathi speakers of the Bombay Presidency demanded a Maharashtra. The Punjabi, Malayalam and Kannada speakers likewise mounted campaigns for states incorporating their particular interests.

The Congress leadership, represented by Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, was initially opposed to linguistic states. Having just witnessed the division of India on the basis of religion, they now feared a further balkanization on the basis of language. However, the demands grew so insistent that the government finally constituted a States Reorganization Commission (SRC). The Commission had three members: a jurist, S. Fazl Ali (who also served as chairman); a historian, K. M. Panikkar; and a social worker, H. N. Kunzru.

The report of the SRC, made public in 1955, recommended that the four major linguistic communities of southern India get states of their own. A consolidated state of Marathi speakers was not granted, principally because the Parsi and Gujarati capitalists of Mumbai were fearful of its consequences. However, this led to a resurgence of the Samyukta (United) Maharashtra demand, which acquired such widespread popular support that in 1960 two separate states of Gujarat and Maharashtra were constituted, with Bombay being awarded to the latter.

The SRC did not concede the demand of Punjabi-speakers either, because it was led by the Sikhs, and the Congress leadership feared that it might be the precursor of an independent Sikh homeland. But when the Sikhs fought so valiantly for India in the 1965 war with Pakistan the longstanding demand for a 'Punjabi Suba' was finally conceded, with the areas dominated by non-Sikhs being separated to constitute the new states of Haryana and Himachal Pradesh.

Viewed retrospectively, the fears of Nehru and Patel appear to have been misplaced. With the partial exception of the Punjab in a particular decade (the 1980s), the new states based on language have not been a threat to national unity. To the contrary, they have consolidated this unity. Whereas Pakistan split into two because the Punjabi and Urdu speakers of the west oppressed the Bengali speakers of the east, and Sri Lanka underwent a thirty-year-civil war because the Sinhala majority sought to make the minority Tamils second-class citizens, the

Republic of India has, by creating clearly demarcated territories and autonomous provincial governments, allowed its major linguistic communities the space and place to nourish and renew themselves.

In the context of the challenges of the 1950s and 1960s, the creation of linguistic states was an effective solution. But must it be a permanent one? Do not now the new challenges of inclusive development and good governance call for a further redrawing of the map of the Republic? That is the question raised by the movement for a Telangana state, a Vidarbha state, a Gorkhaland state, a Bundelkhand state (and some others). Those who articulate these demands do so on the grounds that they represent populations whose livelihood needs and cultural aspirations are denied dignified expression in the excessively large states in which they now find themselves.

Before the General Elections of 2004, the Congress Party, then out of power, forged an alliance with the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS). It made one particular promise and one general promise; support for the creation of a Telangana state, and the formation of a new States Reorganization Commission. After it unexpectedly came to power, the Congress reneged on both promises: the first because it was opposed by the powerful Andhra Chief Minister, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy, the second because it was opposed by the Communist parties, whose support was crucial to the new government's survival, and who vetoed a new SRC because the Bengali comrades did not want to give encouragement to the movement for a state of Gorkhaland.

The constraints of realpolitik compelled the Congress to abandon promises made in 2004. Five years later, it came to power without requiring the support of the Left. Surely it was now time to constitute a new SRC with three or more credible members? That it failed to do so was the product of apathy, inertia, indolence, complacency, in a word, status quoism. The consequence was a resurgence of the Telangana movement. The Central Government, buying time, set up a commission under Justice Srikrishna. The report, recently tabled, basically favours the retention of a united Andhra, and is sure to lead to a fresh and costly wave of strikes, bandhs, fasts, and hartals.

The experience of the past few decades suggests that smaller states are, on the whole, conducive to good (or at least less dreadful) governance. After a unified state of Punjab split into three parts, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and the now truncated, Sikh dominated Punjab have all witnessed steady economic growth. The hill states of Uttarakhand and Meghalaya are better off for having left the low-lying large states of which they were previously part, namely Uttar Pradesh and Assam. I do not believe that, for all their difficulties, the residents of Chattisgarh are nostalgic for the days when it was part of Madhya Pradesh. True, Jharkhand does not appear to have significantly benefited from separation from Bihar, but its major problems—Maoism, the mining mafia, political corruption, etc.—predate its creation as a state of the Union.

The commission that I am calling for—and which both reason and emotion mandate—would consider each case for a new state—Telangana, Vidarbha, Gorkhaland, et al.—on its merits.

Regions that have a cultural, ecological or historical coherence, and are adversely affected by their current status as part of a larger unit, could be granted statehood. For the examples of successful smaller states alluded to above suggests that they may more meaningfully respond to the social and economic needs of the people.

As a political experiment the Indian Republic is young, and still finding its equilibrium. A bold Government, a government that both understands the nature of the Indian experiment and cares for the future of India, would now constitute a new States Reorganization Commission. That government is not, alas, this government, which is damaged by a spate of corruption scandals, and headed by a Prime Minister who is cautious at the best of times. The unrest and discontent will therefore continue in Telangana, and beyond.

### **GIVING AND GAINING**

Arguably the most important crucible of Indian nationalism was the ashram run by Mahatma Gandhi in Ahmedabad from 1915 to 1930. It was here that the programmes for the major satyagrahas were designed, and the activists and social workers who led those satyagrahas trained. Gandhian ideas of non-violence, the upliftment of women, Hindu-Muslim harmony, and the abolition of Untouchability, were all perfected in this ashram.

Had it not been for a munificent philanthropist, however, the ashram may never have survived. Not long after it started, Gandhi admitted an Untouchable family, whereupon his patrons withdrew support. The shortfall was made up by a man identified in Gandhi's autobiography only as 'the Sheth' (but whom we know to have been Ambalal Sarabhai). The Rs 13,000 offered by the Sheth (a considerable sum in 1915) sustained the ashram for more than a year, by which time it was well established, and able to call on support from, as Gandhi wrote, other 'good Hindus [who] do not scruple to help an Ashram where we go the length of dining with the untouchables'.

Philanthropy for the social good must be differentiated from communal charity, where, for example, poor Brahmins or sick Jains are given a leg up by the more fortunate members of their community. The first real philanthropists in India were the Parsis of Bombay, who, in the 19th century, build roads, hospitals, parks, schools and colleges for their fellow citizens (themselves mostly Hindus and Muslims). Names such as Jamshedji Jeejeebhoy, Cowasji Jehangir, and Jamsetji Tata are, justly renowned, but, as that knowledgeable Mumbaier Naresh Fernandes reminds me, history must also remember the contributions of Jewish benefactors (the Sassoons) and Hindu Sheths (as in Jagannath Shankar of that ilk). These traditions have been continued by later Parsis, among them the Bhabhas, the Godrejs, and the Tatas, who have supported major scientific and cultural institutions.

If one large-hearted businessman saved Gandhi's ashram in Ahmedabad, another, Jamnalal Bajaj, funded Gandhi's next (and equally epoch-defining) ashram, which was located in

Sevagram in Central India. The Mahatma had argued that industrialists were 'trustees' whose wealth had to be wisely used for the social good, rather than spent on personal aggrandizement. The family who perhaps best embodied this ideal were the Sarabhais. Thus, in the 1950s and beyond, the descendants of Ambalal created a series of high-quality centres of education in Ahmedabad, among them India's best design and management schools.

These two earlier phases of social sharing form the necessary backdrop to the new, or post-Gandhian, wave of philanthropy. This last wave has been led by the IT czars of my home town, Bangalore. Azim Premji's extraordinarily generous bequest is only the latest, if certainly the most substantial, of a series of donations by software entrepreneurs to the promotion of wider access to education and health, and to scholarly research. Many of these gifts occur below the radar of the press. Thus, one founder of Infosys quit early and has since steadily supported research into innovation and new models of entrepreneurship. Another founder has, again very quietly, helped restore some historic buildings in Mysore. A third, has, likewise without fuss, helped place the unstable finances of India's finest journal of social science research, the Economic and Political Weekly, on a solidly secure footing, this notwithstanding the fact that the EPW has a marked anti-capitalist bias itself.

These three waves of philanthropy have two things in common. First, although Hindus are in an overwhelming majority in India, Hindu businessmen in general, and bania businessmen in particular, have been less willing to contribute to society. I have already mentioned the staggering contributions in this respect of the Parsis, and of the Jews. Azim Premji is of course a Muslim. Interestingly, although the founders of Infosys are Hindus, they come not from a bania background but from other castes. They are children of teachers and managers who made their own money and have thus been more willing to give it away.

To be sure, the capitalists who, inspired by Gandhi, funded public institutions were often banias. However, they would not have done what they did without the Mahatma's challenge. And since Gandhi himself was deeply influenced by Christian traditions of charity and social justice, in acting as they did, they were themselves being somewhat un-bania-like.

The second thing to note is that in all three waves, those who gave have been the exception rather than the rule. In the first decades of this century, as in the first decades of the last, most industrialists have been inclined to stash their money away in foreign banks, and/or use it for conspicuous consumption. Perhaps Mr Premji's magnificent gesture may now provoke or shame his more parsimonious or exhibitionist peers to emulate the Sarabhais and Jagannath Shankarseths of the past.

There is one last point. In the late 19th century all women, including wives of the richest men, were without influence in the public sphere. However, more recently women from rich families have played a salutary role in the promotion of philanthropy. This was especially true of the Sarabhais, where Anusuya, Mridula and Gira made their brothers more socially conscious as

well as more culturally aware. Likewise, one must be thankful that the wives of the IT billionaires have not come in the way of their husbands' donations, or suggested that the funds be used to buy private jets and cricket teams instead. In fact, these women, themselves educated and progressive, have often actively directed their money into the most constructive and creative channels.

## **TWO KINDS OF GLOBALIZATION**

At the beginning of this century, my home town, Bangalore, became a showpiece for the advantages to India of an outward-looking economic policy. The city's Information Technology industry was generating large amounts of foreign exchange by providing high-quality services to global companies. Thousands of new jobs had been created. Besides, as compared to the traditional manufacturing sector, these new industries caused far less damage to the environment.

The appeal of the IT boom was enhanced by the fact that many entrepreneurs came from modest, middle-class backgrounds. They were not born into business families. Having made their money rather than inherited it, they were more willing to share it. Particularly exemplary was Infosys, whose directors chose deliberately to keep their own children out of the company they had created. They also led quiet, unostentatious, lifestyles, that were in striking contrast to the vulgar displays of wealth so common among India's business elite. The founders of Infosys brought further credit to themselves by contributing large amounts of money to social causes such as education, health, and environmental sustainability.

At the beginning of this decade, my home state, Karnataka, has become a showpiece for the disadvantages to India of opening out its economy to the world. According to the government's own figures, at least 30 million tonnes of iron ore were illegally exported from the state between 2000 and 2010. This ore was mined without a proper license, without paying the necessary taxes, and often on land that was officially designated as 'forest'. To feed the hunger for minerals of China in particular, the Government of Karnataka has been prepared to allow, and even encourage, the social and environmental devastation of more-or-less the entire district of Bellary.

Software engineers in Bangalore are paid well, work in a clean, sanitized, controlled environment, and have access to proper health care. On the other hand, mineworkers in Bellary are often paid less than the minimum wage prescribed by law. They work long hours in the hot sun, and are continually exposed to dust and pollution. By comparison with, say, automobile manufacturing, IT is much less profligate in its use of the earth's resources; compared to mining, it is the greenest of green enterprises. Thus the search for iron in Bellary has led to the forests being stripped and the soils rendered unfit for cultivation. The most severe impact has been on the water regime, with springs drying up and rivers being subject to massive pollution.



With regard to the condition of the workforce and the state of the environment, software in Bangalore and iron ore mining in Bellary are a study in contrast. The contrast is further sharpened when we consider the character of the entrepreneurs in the two sectors. The leading software titans are good citizens, who have, in material terms, given abundantly back to society. On the other hand, the mining lords of Bellary have bent the law to their will, and to their stacks of cash. The police and other authorities in the district are largely subservient to them. Again, while Bellary has the highest number of Mercedes cars per capita of any Indian city, I have not heard anyone speak of mineowners having opened schools and hospitals for the poor. The one gift they are known to have made was of a crown of gold and diamonds (valued at Rs 45 crores) to the deity at the temple of Tirupathi, hoping no doubt that this would encourage the gods to overlook, or perhaps even endorse, their manifold transgressions of the law and of the moral code.

I should immediately correct myself. The Bellary mine-owners have made other and more substantial gifts, which are to political parties. It is widely believed that, in the last state elections in Karnataka, the campaign of the Bharatiya Janata Party was largely underwritten by them. When the BJP and its allies obtained a majority, the Bellary magnates were rewarded with three important posts in the Cabinet. It is said that the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was less than pleased with these developments; they were worried about the taint of corruption, and suspicious of interlopers who had opportunistically joined the party. However, the RSS was over-ruled by the BJP, which was desperate to come to power in a southern state.

To be fair, while some mining lords are with the BJP, others have funded the Congress and even stood for elections under that party's banner. In fact, the three Ministers from Bellary in the BJP Government were close to, and possibly sponsored and promoted by, the late Congress Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy. At the same time, they remain close to, and have definitely been sponsored and promoted by, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, Sushma Swaraj.

The less-than-salutary story of the Bellary mine lords is the subject of a documentary film currently being made by Paranjay Guha Thakurta. Despite having lived for twenty years in that contaminating city, New Delhi, Guha Thakurta has retained his independence and integrity. An experienced and respected journalist, he has the added advantage—for the project at hand—of having made extensive studies of the social, political, and environmental impact of coal mining in Eastern India.

Guha Thakurta was recently in Bangalore, after a spell shooting in Bellary. According to him, the case of mining in Karnataka represents the first time that such close links have been forged between the worlds of crime, business, and politics. In the past, a Mumbai mastan occasionally fought and won an election; other mastans funded the odd politician. But never before have those who made money by illegal and even violent means so brazenly and effectively taken over the politics and administration of an entire Indian state.

What are the larger lessons from the two stories summarized here? That there is a benign side to globalization, but also a brutal side. When the world economy offers opportunities for knowledge workers creating products that do not use much energy and do not damage the environment, these must be grabbed with both hands. When the world economy instead invites us to exploit scarce natural resources quickly, and without a thought for environmental sustainability, then we must be more sceptical.

How to make the best of globalization, given our human and natural endowments, is a matter of public policy. How to make wealth and how then to spend it is a matter of personal choice. In their search for the big buck, the Bellary mine lords have shown a profound lack of concern for the law and for their fellow citizens. On the other hand, the best among Bangalore's software entrepreneurs have made their money fairly and legally, spent a small fraction on themselves, and a larger fraction on various charitable and philanthropic causes.

In a single decade, my home town and home state have seen the best of globalization and the worst of globalization, the emergence of the most progressive form of capitalism and its eclipse by the most barbaric form of capitalism.

## **JUSTICE AND THE ADIVASI**

In the summer of 2006, I travelled with a group of scholars and writers through the district of Dantewada, then (as now) the epicentre of the conflict between the Indian State and Maoist rebels. Writing about my experiences in a four-part series published in *The Telegraph*, I predicted that the conflict would intensify, because the Maoists would not give up their commitment to armed struggle, while the Government would not be able to 'put the interests of a vulnerable minority—the adivasis—ahead of those with more money and political power'. Thus 'in the forest regions of central and eastern India, years of struggle and strife lie ahead. Here, in the jungles and hills they once called their own, the tribals will find themselves pierced on one side by the State and pressed on the other by the insurgents.'

That my forecast appears to have come true does not give me much satisfaction. The scholar was obliged to draw a melancholy conclusion, but the citizen still hoped that one side would give up arms and the other more sincerely implement the provisions of the Indian Constitution. In the wake of continuing attacks by Maoists on security forces, and the killings of Maoist leaders in illegal 'encounters', it is even harder for hope to win out over cynicism. However, even if one cannot see a resolution of the problem any time soon, one can still seek a deeper understanding of its genesis. This can be had through two recent works of scholarship that take the tribal predicament as their point of departure.

Out of this Earth, co-authored by the anthropologist Felix Padel and the activist Samarendra Das, provides a comprehensive analysis of the social and environmental impacts of the mining boom in Orissa. The authors show how companies split tribal communities by bribes and coercion, such that a division emerges between ‘accepters’ and ‘refusers’. They document the extensive collusion between politicians and bureaucrats on the one hand and private companies on the other, which has forced tribals off the land they own but below which valuable ores are to be found.

As Padel and Das point out, the autonomous and non-violent resistance to destructive mining has been misrepresented by the state, corporate interests and even at times by the media as a ‘Maoist threat’. This latter label is then used ‘to crush all kinds of indigenous opposition based on the people’s refusal to be displaced, to allow their land to be snatched away and their communities to be torn apart.’

The Padel-Das work may be read in conjunction with a study conducted by the Institute of Rural Management, Anand (IRMA). Closely researched and soberly argued, the study—whose principal authors are Ajay Dandekar and Chitragada Choudhury—examines the workings of the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA). Passed in 1996, PESA conferred on tribal communities the ownership of non-timber forest produce, the power to prevent alienation of land to non-tribals, the power of prior recommendation in granting mining leases, and the right to be consulted in land acquisition by the Government. Assessing the impact of the legislation a decade later, the report found that ‘in most states, the enabling rules for the gram sabha’s control over prospecting of minor minerals, planning and management of water bodies, control and management of minor forest produce, [and] dissent to land acquisition are not yet in place, suggesting reluctance by the state governments to honour the mandate of PESA’.

The IRMA study passes strictures on the abdication by Governors of their responsibilities. Although they have been ‘accorded limitless power by the Constitution to ensure the upholding of PESA’, the Governors of different states ‘have slowly but surely been neglecting their duties towards the law, and towards tribal communities’. Tribal activists told the IRMA team that ‘Governors have not responded in a single instance to their petitions for interventions in crises that threaten them, such as deepening clashes over land, mining or police excesses.’

The Dandekar-Choudhury study speaks of the widespread transfer of tribal lands into non-tribal hands, through fraud and forcible occupation. Despite a long-standing promise to repeal or amend it, the colonial-era Land Acquisition Act of 1894 is still being used, or misused, to acquire land owned by households and communities and hand it over to the corporate sector. In the process, the state has sparked a series of bitter conflicts throughout eastern and central India.

‘When it comes to acquiring mineral resources for industry’, notes the study, ‘the stakes are ... loaded against the functioning of the PESA Act. ...[T]here is still no legal framework in place for communities to dissent in such activity in their area if they so desire, or to secure a direct

stake in the earnings, through instruments such as jobs or debentures'. In one village in Orissa, the researchers found that a large police station had recently been constructed, whereas in the past five decades the State Government had not bothered to build a hospital or public health centre. The reason for this bias was immediately obvious—in the shape of a new aluminium factory that had come up near the village. 'Do our people need better police facilities or better health care', asked the village headman. 'What is the administration's priority?', he continued, before supplying this answer: 'This is being done only because the company wants police stations, which can beat us if we ever protest against land acquisition'.

In the past decade, it is in tribal districts that the Maoists have made the greatest gains, in good part because of the state's own short-sighted and exploitative policies. The IRMA researchers are no sympathizers of the methods of the Naxalites. They see them (in my view, rightly) as a threat not just to Indian democracy, but to democratic values in general. They quote an activist who notes that while the Maoists might have, in the beginning, fought for greater economic and social rights for tribals, over the years they have 'become corrupt, power hungry and intolerant of any difference[s]'. The insurgents are also deeply hypocritical; thus 'while denouncing the "loot of adivasi resources", the Party takes money from the mining industry to fund its operations'.

If, despite the brutality of their methods, the Maoists have yet gained ground, it is because the Indian state has treated its tribal citizens with condescension and contempt. A course correction would take the form of 'implementing PESA with political will, urgency, and creativity'. The IRMA researchers suggest that memoranda of understanding with factories and mining companies 'should be re-examined in a public exercise, with gram sabhas at the centre...'. Each industrial or mining project in tribal areas should be preceded by an environmental impact assessment conducted by qualified and independent experts. More broadly, through 'financial and juridical devolution to gram sabhas, a model of participatory and community-centred development should be nurtured', to replace the current model of top-down, industry-centred, resource-exploitative form of development being imposed on tribal areas.

Ironically, although it had commissioned this assessment of PESA, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj has thus far refused to allow it to be printed. If the Ministry is sincere about its mandate, it should have this study read by all its officials. The officials of the Home Ministry and the Prime Minister's Office would profit from reading it too. Perhaps four people in particular should closely read and digest its contents: the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, the Congress President, and the youngest of the Congress General Secretaries.

The IRMA study quotes an activist as saying that 'the government might not be interested in talking to the Maoists without certain pre-conditions. But what stops it from talking to its own people and understanding their pain?' Mahatma Gandhi once walked through the riot-torn districts of Bengal and Bihar—it may be too much to ask the leaders of today to walk through Dantewada, or Koraput, or Narayanpur, or Gadchiroli, or any of the other areas of tribal suffering and discontent.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGE

Thirty years ago, a Department of Environment was set up in the Central Government; twenty-five years ago, this was upgraded into a full-fledged Ministry of Environment and Forests. As we mark these anniversaries, it must be said that the Ministers in charge of this Ministry have generally been incompetent, or malign, or both. Some might make an exception for Maneka Gandhi, who was Minister of State for the Environment between 1989 and 1991. However, she was an animal rights activist with no real understanding of the development-environment interface. As Minister, she showed little interest in the issues of sustainable water management raised by the Narmada Bachao Andolan; nor did she provide support to sensitive bureaucrats in her own Ministry who were seeking to promote decentralized models of forest management. She did however concentrate most fiercely on depriving bear-handlers of their traditional means of livelihood.

Intellectually speaking, the present incumbent, Jairam Ramesh, is a considerable improvement on Maneka Gandhi, and on all others who have held the post since 1980. Trained in technology, and then in economics and public policy, Ramesh has a sophisticated appreciation of the environmental challenges facing the country. Like perhaps no else in the Cabinet, he understands that present models of economic growth, based as they are on scarce fossil fuels and on the chemical contamination of our life-support systems, are simply unsustainable. As an economist, he knows that we have to lift the masses of our people out of poverty; as an environmentalist, he knows that at the same time we have to moderate the demands on the earth of the richer and more wasteful sections of our population.

As the last two decades of economic development have demonstrated, the business community in particular and the middle class in general are quite unmindful of the ecological footprint of their lifestyles. Consider the pattern of urbanization in India. Cities extract water, energy and other resources from the hinterland, and give only pollution in exchange. Meanwhile, the urban poor have scant access to safe housing, or to clean water and sanitation. Although these processes impact hundreds of millions of Indians, urban environmental planning—in both its internal and external dimensions—is a subject seriously neglected in the media and in political circles alike.

In the year that he has been Minister of State for the Environment, holding independent charge, Jairam Ramesh has undertaken some important initiatives. He commissioned the country's leading ecologist, Professor Madhav Gadgil, to assess the research record of the Botanical and Zoological Surveys of India. He appointed, to high positions in the Forest Department, the best qualified officers, disregarding political lobbying on behalf of lesser candidates. He has drawn attention to the destruction of forests caused by unregulated mining. Unlike some of his predecessors, he has not allowed infrastructure projects to wantonly devastate our national parks.

Ramesh's work and record have however been undermined by a certain flamboyance and lack of discretion. His recent broadside against convocation robes on behalf of a romantic indigenism was plain silly; and his criticisms of the Home Ministry when on tour in China were damaging to the credibility of both his party and his Government. Such lapses are in keeping with past trends. As an Officer on Special Duty in the Prime Minister's Office in the early 1990s, Ramesh lost his job because he spoke too readily to journalists. A decade later, having just joined the Congress, he was almost thrown out of the party for joking to newsmen about its President's alleged incapacities.

It is tempting to see Jairam Ramesh as another Shashi Tharoor, as an intelligent and well-read man undone by his own self-regard and lack of judgement. Many people already have. One columnist writes of Ramesh and Tharoor that 'these guys are obsessed. Jairam's carefully blow-dried, gently hair-sprayed coiffeur competes with Shashi's side-swept locks and immaculately dyed sideburns. They also share a swagger that goes with their very apparent vanity'.

At any level other than the superficial, however, this comparison does not wash. Through the 1980s and 1990s, while Tharoor was living overseas, Ramesh worked in public service in India—with, among others, the Planning Commission and the Technology Missions. On the job, and by travelling around the country, he deepened his understanding of the links, positive and negative, between technology and social change. In educating himself about India, he had the benefit of outstanding mentors such as Sam Pitroda and the late Lovraj Kumar.

When the UPA Government was sworn in last summer, these two hair-obsessed men were given very different assignments. Foreign policy was (and is) kept in the hands of the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, and the National Security Adviser. As Minister of State for External Affairs, Shashi Tharoor's responsibilities were limited. On the other hand, Jairam Ramesh was put solely in charge of a very important Ministry.

Although the media focuses a great deal on climate change nowadays, we should in fact be even more concerned about the sustainable management of nature and natural resources within the country. For India today is an environmental basket case, and in at least five respects: (1) The rapid depletion of groundwater aquifers; (2) the impending or actual death of our major rivers through household sewage and industrial effluents; (3) the excessively high rates of air pollution in our cities; (4) the unregulated disposal of chemical and toxic waste; and (5) the continuing degradation of our forests and the associated loss of biodiversity. These problems have local, regional, and national impacts. Collectively considered, they raise a huge question pattern against the sustainability of present patterns of agrarian and industrial development.

We must therefore become more pro-active on the environment in our own national interest, and regardless of our global obligations. It is not enough to stop destructive practices (such as mining in tropical forests); rather, the Ministry of Environment must nudge other Ministries and society at large towards more sustainable forms of resource use. The Ministry must take the lead in

framing suitable policies in different resource sectors. At the same time, individuals and communities also must take greater responsibility for the consequences of their actions.

The environmental crisis in India is many-sided and multi-faceted. It has to be addressed on different fronts and by a variety of different actors. We need to harness scientific and social-scientific expertise to develop and promote eco-friendly technologies in energy, water management, housing, and transportation (among other fields). Scientific innovation needs to be complemented by legislative change as well as by changes in social behaviour. For this, we need new ideas, new innovations, new institutions, and, perhaps above all, a more imaginative and less short-sighted political leadership.

The future of India, as an economy and as a society, as a nation and as a civilization, depends to a far greater extent on the state of our natural environment than on the state of the Sensex. It is to the credit of Jairam Ramesh that he is one of the very few politicians who realizes this. His recent indiscretions should therefore be forgiven—by his party and by the public at large. He should be asked to speak less to the press, and speak more to the very many environmental activists and scholars whose advice and expertise can help his Ministry become what it has so rarely been in the three decades of its existence—a genuine force for the good.

### **TRAVEL TIPS FOR THE PRIME MINISTER**

In seventeen years as Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru visited the United States on three separate occasions. Dr Manmohan Singh has been three times to the U. S. in the past year alone. Those on the left of the political spectrum might interpret this as evidence of a dangerous subservience. I do not share this view, not least because two of Dr Singh's three recent visits to the U. S. were for multilateral meetings. Still, the statistics are telling. Do they perhaps speak of a somewhat excessive emphasis on foreign policy, whereby India's place in the world has assumed more importance for the Prime Minister than the status of Indians within India?

This turn to the outside is encouraged by a strain of boosterism in the press, led by editors who seek a greater global role for India, and endorsed by businessmen who wish not to be constrained by the domestic market alone. However, the claim to a place on the world's High Table may be premature. The Republic of India is bleeding, from a thousand little cuts and a dozen larger ones. There is continuing discontent in the Kashmir Valley, and even greater discontent in Manipur. The talks with the Naga rebels are going nowhere. The Maoist insurgency in central India has assumed dangerous proportions. The agrarian distress in the states of the Peninsula shows no signs of abating. Linguistic chauvinism episodically raises its head in India's urbs prima, Mumbai.

Many of these conflicts have their roots in the uneven and inequitable pattern of economic development in India. Meanwhile, prospects for more inclusive growth are threatened by gross

corruption at all levels of Government, from the lowly tehsildar right up to the Union Minister. Economic and social well-being are also undermined by the shocking state of government schools, universities, and hospitals.

This month the United Progressive Alliance completes six years in office. A report card on its performance thus far would rate it as mediocre, 50% or a B grade perhaps. True, the threat of a Hindu Rashtra has receded, and the country still hangs together. But the list of problems outlined in the previous paragraphs suggests that there is still much work to be done.

If the UPA Government has had a rather ordinary record, this is in part due to the fact that the most powerful person in the Government has no real power, while the most powerful person in the Alliance has no real accountability. It is well known that Dr Manmohan Singh cannot decide Cabinet appointments on his own. It is less well recognized that he cannot autonomously frame the economic and political policies that are necessary to tackle the range of social conflicts that undermine Indian democracy and threaten Indian unity.

To outline those policies is beyond the scope of this column. What I wish to flag here is merely one consequence of the curious division of authority between Dr Singh and Mrs Sonia Gandhi—namely, that the Prime Minister of India rarely gets to speak, face-to-face, with the people of India. The meetings he addresses tend to be science congresses and confederations of industry. The task of connecting with ordinary citizens is left to the Congress (and UPA) President and her son.

It would be interesting to get details of the Prime Minister's domestic tours in these past six years. Has he visited all twenty-eight States of the Indian Union? It is unlikely that he has. Has he visited any State more than once in the same year? This too may not be the case. And what kind of meetings has he addressed? It appears that it is only at election time that he speaks to the aam admi. On other occasions, his audiences are more formal, and restricted, linked to an annual meeting of some organization or the inauguration of a university or rail link.

Sonia and Rahul Gandhi speak more often to the aam admi, although their interactions are also very heavily determined by the election cycle. Like the Prime Minister, they keep away from areas of social conflict—they have not visited Dantewada, for example, nor (so far as I can recall) Nagaland and Manipur either. Moreover, since they do not occupy positions in Government, they cannot—and need not—take responsibility for its policies.

Travelling abroad, Dr Singh is less encumbered. Since the Gandhis do not have a real interest in foreign policy, he enjoys more autonomy and authority here. However, now that he has completed six full years in office, it may be time for the Prime Minister to assert himself more in the sphere of domestic policy as well. To begin with, he might start making regular trips to the States, trips unconnected with specific projects but undertaken merely to make contact with the people in whose name he exercises office.



It may be argued that these demands are unrealistic, given Dr Singh's own understated personality. But human beings are capable of self-transformation—consider how another quiet, diffident, man, Lal Bahadur Shastri, became more decisive once he became Prime Minister. The less-than-happy condition of the Republic demands a more assertive Prime Minister. The term of the present incumbent still has four years to run; time enough to begin moderating social conflicts and reforming public institutions. Indeed, in terms of his own legacy, it matters far more what state Dr Manmohan Singh leaves India and Indians in 2014, than what the world in general (or the West in particular) thinks of us.

### **A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIPARTISANSHIP**

When the politician-social worker Nanaji Deshmukh died last month, none of the obituaries mentioned what may have been his finest moment. This occurred during a debate in the Rajya Sabha in the first week of May 2002. The subject being discussed was the recent Gujarat riots. As members of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Congress traded accusations, Deshmukh intervened to suggest that the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, and the Leader of the Opposition, Sonia Gandhi, together visit the camps of Gujarat in a bid to restore communal harmony.

Tragically, the polarized political atmosphere of the time would not allow the proposal to be taken forward. Now, eight years later, a bipartisan consensus in the same House has permitted the passing of the Women's Reservation Bill. (Perhaps I should have said 'tripartisan', since the support of the Left was vital.) This important—it is too early to say 'historic'—event prompts a closer look at the past and possible future of bi-and-tri-partisan politics in India.

India was made united and democratic by an extraordinary act of political selflessness, whereby a particular party put the interests of the nation above its own. The Congress had dominated the struggle for freedom from British colonial rule, but when the first Cabinet of independent India was constituted, crucial portfolios were assigned to those who were not Congressmen. The Madras businessman and Justice Party politician, R. K. Shanmukham Chetty, was made Finance Minister, while the Akali Dal leader, Baldev Singh, became Defence Minister.

The most remarkable appointment to that first Cabinet, however, was that of B. R. Ambedkar. Through the 1930s and 1940s, Ambedkar had been a bitter opponent of the Congress, and had attacked Mahatma Gandhi in particular in very sharp language. Yet, as Rajmohan Gandhi tells us, when India became independent, the Mahatma advised Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel to include Ambedkar in the Cabinet, on the grounds that 'freedom has come to India, not to the Congress party'. The old adversary of the Congress was made Law Minister, as well as Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution. Good deeds led to noble ends, for Ambedkar did an excellent job in piloting the Constitution through an often fractious Assembly.

The second great example of cross-party collaboration took place at the end of the 1970s. Until then, the decade had been marked by vicious rivalries between the Congress on the one hand and the Opposition parties on the other. In 1974 and 1975, the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, and her main political opponent, Jayaprakash Narayan, traded charges that brought little credit to either party. A popular movement against the Government led by Narayan was answered by Mrs Gandhi in June 1975 through the imposition of a State of Emergency which led to the arrest and incarceration of thousands of politicians and social workers.

In January 1977 the Emergency was lifted and fresh elections called. On the eve of the polls, the Opposition politician Morarji Desai told an interviewer that if his Janata Party came to power, it would 'work for the removal of fear which has enveloped the people'. One of its first tasks would be 'to rectify the Constitution' to rid it of the Emergency-era amendments which had reduced the powers of the Supreme Court and the legislature, while greatly magnifying the powers of the Prime Minister. 'We will have to ensure', said Morarji Desai, 'that [an] Emergency like this can never be imposed [again]. No Government should be able to do so'.

When the Janata Party came to power and Morarji became Prime Minister, he kept his word. His outstanding Law Minister, Shanti Bhushan, supervised the drafting of amendments to the Constitution which would restore the position of the Courts, make the functioning of legislatures more transparent, reduce the arbitrary powers of the Centre, and so on. These amendments required a two-thirds majority in Parliament. By now, however, even the Congress Party was embarrassed by the Emergency and its excesses. Thus, when these amendments were discussed in Parliament on 7th December 1978, both Morarji Desai and Indira Gandhi voted in favour, along with their respective party members.

Democracy requires debate and dissent, these articulated by individuals and parties who subscribe to different points of view. So long as these arguments are conducted by words and not through violence, intimidation, or blackmail, they are necessary and vital. At the same time, there are moments in a democracy's history when political rivals need to work together in the common good.

These not necessarily be Constitutional matters alone. In the wake of the Gujarat riots, had the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition the courage to follow Nanaji Deshmukh's advice, it would have sent an extraordinarily powerful—and wholly positive—message to the citizenry at large. Now, in the wake of the crisis caused by the rising Maoist insurgency, there needs to be a cross-party (if not all-party) consensus on how not to yield to violence and terror while simultaneously making amends for the shocking exploitation of tribal people by the Indian state and corporate interests down the decades. The corruption of our political class, and of our judiciary, police, and civil service, is another problem that can only be tackled by an abandonment of partisan and self-interested positions.

In the history of democratic India, examples of constructive cross-party collaboration are rare indeed. Those who are pleased with the recent denouement in the Rajya Sabha should now work towards making such happenings a more regular feature of our political life.

### **RECONCILING THE MAOISTS**

Soon after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in January 1948, the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS) was banned. This was in part because Gandhi's murderer, Nathuram Godse, had once been a member of the RSS; and in part because RSS leaders played a crucial role in the polarization of Hindu-Muslim relations that led to that tragic event. For over a year, the head of the RSS, M. S. Golwalkar, languished in jail. Finally, in July 1949, the organization was unbanned and the leader freed after they agreed to adhere to the Indian Constitution and eschew the use of violence.

This history is not entirely irrelevant to the policies the Government of India may consider in their dealings with the Communist Party of India (Maoist). That party is at present banned; because it promotes armed struggle and refuses to recognize the Indian Constitution. As a consequence, the forests of central and eastern India have witnessed intense conflict between the Indian state and Maoist rebels. Shocking crimes have been committed by both sides; with the main victims being the tribals and poor peasants caught in the middle.

Now, the Maoist offer of a seventy-two day ceasefire offers the (admittedly slender) hope of a temporary respite. The Maoists have demanded that their party be unbanned and their leaders under arrest released. It is hard to see how these conditions can be met unless the party lays down arms and accepts the Constitution. Since this is unlikely, the Government may consider another precedent, which comes from its dealings with Naga insurgents. This keeps the question of the Constitution in abeyance, while promising safe passage to the leaders who are at large (in this case, in exile), allowing them to travel for talks with the Indian state.

In the short-term, the Government of India might invoke the Naga model and follow the offer of a cease-fire by speaking to the Maoists. In the medium-term, it must look to the RSS model, whereby a group that once refused to recognize the Indian Constitution comes around to working within it. While in private some RSS leaders may still dream of a Hindu Rashtra, in public they have accepted the legitimacy of the Indian state. In the same fashion, the Maoists must be persuaded, over a period of time, to give up their fantasy of a communist dictatorship, and work within the plural, multi-party democratic process mandated by the Constitution of India.

In dealing with the Maoist problem, the Government needs to focus on the here and now; on tomorrow; and on the years to come. For the rise of Maoism in recent decades is based on the deep discontent of our tribal communities. They were ignored in the colonial period, and have been oppressed in the decades since independence. The national movement, under Gandhi's

direction, worked hard to make Dalits, Muslims and women part of the mainstream. These efforts were not wholly successful. But the tribals were left out of the purview of the freedom struggle altogether. Since 1947, meanwhile, they have fared even worse than Dalits and Muslims in terms of access to education, health care, and dignified employment. They have also suffered disproportionately from displacement, having to abandon their homes and lands for development projects that ultimately benefit Indians who are not themselves tribals.

The Maoists have taken advantage of this long historical experience of marginalization and exploitation. But they have been equally helped by the recent policies of State Governments. Until about ten years ago, there were virtually no Maoists in Orissa; but then that State chose to hand over tribal lands wholesale to mining companies. When the tribals protested, they were branded as 'Naxalites'; a self-fulfilling prophecy, since the fact of their displacement opened up a space for the Maoists to move into. The insurgents now have a considerable presence across several districts of highland Orissa.

In West Bengal, the growth of Naxalism has been helped by the politicization of the district administration. Superintendents of Police and District Magistrate are expected to consolidate the control of the ruling party, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), rather than concern themselves with rural development or law and order. To make matters worse, the bhadrak culture of Bengali Communism condescends to the tribals, who have never been represented in the party's leadership, and unlike Hindu or Muslim peasants have never been the focus of targeted welfare schemes. In Jharkhand, meanwhile, local MLA's and Ministers have got themselves into the habit of regularly bribing the Maoists, thus emboldening them further.

The errors and crimes of other State Governments pale into insignificance when compared to the misdemeanours of the Chattisgarh Government. In 2005, the State decided to arm a vigilante group, called Salwa Judum, to take on the Maoists. In a bizarre and deeply destructive example of bipartisanship, the Salwa Judum were jointly promoted by the BJP Chief Minister, Raman Singh, and the Congress Leader of the Opposition, Mahendra Karma. Given open license by the administration, the vigilantes embarked on looting, killing, burning, and raping villages and villagers they deemed to be sympathetic to the Naxalites.

As a consequence of this intensification of the conflict, almost one hundred thousand people were rendered homeless in Dantewara district alone. Between them, Raman Singh of the BJP and Mahendra Karma of the Congress have thus been responsible for displacing more people than the dams on the Narmada River. Far from controlling Naxalism, their policies have actually played into the hands of the adversary. In a recent interview, the Maoist spokesman Azad claimed that 'thanks to Salwa Judum, our war has achieved in four years what it would have otherwise achieved in two decades'.

In all these States, the tribals have suffered in good part because they are a vulnerable minority. Chattisgarh and Jharkhand were formed to protect the adivasi interest; yet the tribals in both

States constitute only around 30% of the population. In Orissa the proportion is just over 20%; in Gujarat and Rajasthan, under 15%; in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal, less than 10%. Everywhere, the tribals are outnumbered and outvoted by the non-tribal majority. The political disadvantage is compounded by a social and economic one—everywhere, the non-tribals have more land, wealth, status, and influence. The levers of political power, of economic power, of the courts, and of the media, all lie outside the grasp of the tribals. In all the States of the Union, and regardless of which party is in power, the policies of the Government are overwhelmingly biased against the tribals.

The rise of Maoism is one of perhaps five major challenges facing the country (the others, in my view, are the continuing violence in Kashmir, Manipur and other border states; the corruption of our political class and of the state more generally; the growing inequality between the rich and the poor; and the rapid pace of environmental degradation). To tame and contain this challenge requires clear thinking and hard work. To begin with, one must put a stop to the cycle of violence and counter-violence, and facilitate talks between the state and the rebels. Next, one must work patiently to wean the Maoists away from the cult of the gun, thus to reconcile them with the rule of law and multi-party democracy. Finally, one must seriously attempt to renew public institutions and to frame better policies, so that tribals can come, at last, to enjoy the fruits of equal citizenship.

Like those other challenges, Maoism can only be overcome if our political parties work together rather than in rivalrous opposition. It is crucial that parties and leaders not be contained by the logic of the electoral cycle; rather, they should take a view that is at once short-term, medium-term, and long-term. Such visionary and selfless thinking may perhaps be too much to ask of the present generation of Indian politicians.

## **HOW NOT TO CHOOSE A GOVERNOR**

In the first weeks of December, I travelled through four states of the Union. In each state, I discussed the local political situation with a cross-section of the citizenry. We spoke of the work of Ministers and Chief Ministers, and, as it happens, of Governors. In one place, I heard the complaint that the Governor's son was transacting his private business from the Raj Bhavan; in a second, that the Governor was playing host to builders and mining dons; in a third, that he was unwilling to make himself available for public functions; in a fourth, that he spent more time in his home state than in the state where he was posted by the President.

One state I did not visit was Andhra Pradesh. I believe that in golf courses around the country, there has been admiring talk of the virility of the octogenarian pleasure-seeker whose activities in the Hyderabad Raj Bhavan the television cameras purport to have captured. In less elevated circles, the incident should instead provoke the questions—how do we choose our Governors, and how must we choose them?

The first question is easily answered. A vast majority of Governors are appointed on the basis of loyalty rather than competence. Between 1998 and 2004, preference was given to members of the Bharatiya Janata Party or the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, whose services to party or sect were rewarded by a stint in a Raj Bhavan. Since 2004, the appointees have been made chiefly on the basis of loyalty to the Congress Party and its leaders. In appointing Governors, both the Congress and the BJP rarely investigate the suitability of the candidate for the state to which he or she is being posted. Little wonder that many Governors treat their posting either as extended holidays paid for by someone else or as opportunities for helping friends and kin.

To be sure, there are exceptions. My home state, Karnataka, was fortunate in having the scholar-administrator T. N. Chaturvedi serve a full term as Governor. Although appointed by a BJP Government, Chaturvedi behaved with scrupulous impartiality during a very testing time, marked by fractured election mandates and unstable coalition governments. He also took a keen interest in literature and the arts. One of his last initiatives was to have a train from Chennai to Mysore renamed the Malgudi Express, in homage to R. K. Narayan, who lived in both cities and whose novels were set in a fictional village of that name. (The proposal was stalled by a philistine Railway Ministry—but perhaps it can be revived yet.)

Another recent Governor with an exemplary record was Gopalkrishna Gandhi. West Bengal has been exceptionally fortunate in this regard—since Independence, it has had such outstanding Governors as C. Rajagopalachari, H. C. Mookerjee, Padmaja Naidu, and Nurul Hasan. In the opinion of Bengalis with long memories Gopalkrishna Gandhi was better than them all. When appointed, he was considered close to the Left; yet through his conduct in the Nandigram and Singur episodes he showed that his first and last commitment was to the Constitution of India.

I am told that the love for Gopalkrishna Gandhi was so great that he could win an election from any constituency in West Bengal. The admiration was mutual. The Governor travelled extensively in the State, getting to remote hamlets not visited even by elected politicians. He did a great deal to restore heritage sites, and to try and revive the once great university at Santiniketan. His empathy with his adopted state was such that by the end of his tenure he could speak and read Bengali fluently.

Chaturvedi and Gandhi shared some things in common—namely, intelligence, integrity, and a close understanding of the Constitution deriving from many decades in the civil service. It may be that non-political Governors are generally more able and effective, but sometimes party men can do a decent job too. Thus the current Governor of Maharashtra, S. C. Jamir, is trying hard to infuse energy into the mostly moribund universities of the state. In the past, Vice-Chancellors were appointed chiefly according to caste considerations or closeness to ruling party politicians. Knowing this, Jamir has sought, in his capacity as Chancellor of the state universities, to staff selection committees with independent-minded scholars.

Like the office of President, the office of Governor has many ceremonial functions attached to it—such as opening and closing legislatures, receiving and sending off state visitors, laying foundation stones and cutting ribbons for all kinds of schemes and projects. But, like the President again, the Governors can sometimes play an active role in shaping society, by acting impartially in times of political crisis, and by identifying with and promoting the best cultural and intellectual traditions of the state in which they have come to serve.

We live in troubled and corrupt times, with most states riven by sectarian discord of one kind or another, and most public institutions in atrophy or decay. A carelessly chosen Governor can hasten the slide in the state to which he is sent; a well chosen one, do something to arrest it. The scandal in the Hyderabad Raj Bhavan would have served its purpose if the Government of India can henceforth ensure that administrative competence shall take precedence over party loyalty in the appointment of Governors to the twenty-eight states that make our Union.

## **OUR ATOM STATE**

The most secretive institution in India is the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC). Although its power plants profess to produce goods for the benefit of the public, they are not judged by the standards of profitability and accountability that the market imposes on other industries. Nor, like other government-owned and managed firms, do they have to report to the Parliamentary Committee on Public Undertakings. In fact, by an Act of Parliament they have been made exempt from the scrutiny of Parliament itself.

No ordinary citizen can get anywhere near an atomic installation, and even the most well-connected historian cannot get anywhere near the records of the AEC or its associated bodies. But by a stroke of luck I once stumbled upon snatches of correspondence connected with this otherwise closed and inward-looking organization. When I found these documents, a decade ago, I xeroxed and filed them away. They bear exhuming today, since they speak directly to the controversy relating to the recent leak in the Kaiga nuclear plant.

The documents date to the year 1967, when the Congress had just won its fourth General Elections in a row. Among the new entrants to the Ministry was M. S. Gurupadaswamy, who was appointed Minister of State for Atomic Energy. Gurupadaswamy had previously been a member of the Praja Socialist Party, an organization known for cultivating both intelligence as well as independence of mind. In keeping with this tradition, he took his new job rather seriously.

He visited the plants then in operation, and spoke to a cross-section of scientists and staff. What he found was not altogether to his liking. He wrote to the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, that the work of the AEC ‘appears to be on [a] low keel’; that there were serious delays; and that there was a loss of morale among the staff. He recommended that a set of procedures ‘be evolved to

achieve greater accountability [as] to the time-schedule, production, cost, technical performance, etc' of our nuclear power plants.

Having alerted the Prime Minister to the deficiencies within the AEC, the new Minister of State then took up the matter with the Chairman of the Commission, the physicist Vikram Sarabhai. He asked him to supply details of project costs, expenditure incurred over the past few years including the foreign exchange component, the reasons for delays, and the impediments faced in the execution of their work. These details were important in themselves, but Mr Gurupadaswamy further added that they might be used in 'a comparative study of the Atomic Energy Commission, the Railway Board, and the P&T Board'. (That he thought of these comparisons is testimony to the Minister's intelligence, for the railways and postal service were the two government agencies that provided tangible and mostly positive services to the citizens of India.)

These (very reasonable) suggestions provoked panic and paranoia in the AEC. The Chairman wrote to the Prime Minister insisting that he report only to her, since there was 'no provision in the constitution [of the AEC] for a Minister of State for Atomic Energy to concern himself with the formulation of policy or with the implementation of decisions'. He believed that 'it would be most unfortunate' if the 'existing relations between the Commission, its Chairman and the Prime Minister', were to be altered 'through the nature of information and consultation that is required at the Ministerial level and the frequency of reporting' that Mr Gurupadaswamy had asked for.

In a handwritten note to her Secretary (a copy of which I possess) Mrs Gandhi enclosed this correspondence with the comment: 'Shri Gurupadaswamy is full of zeal. Dr Sarabhai thinks it is misplaced zeal!' Four decades on, I think that we can safely conclude that the zeal was in fact well directed. For studies by independent researchers strongly suggest that our atomic energy programme is an economic failure as well as an environmental disaster. Nor does the charge-sheet end here, for, by the very nature of its functioning, the AEC has undermined the democratic ideals of the nation.

Take the environmental question first. The construction of nuclear installations often involves the loss of green cover—in the case of Kaiga, the loss of some of the best rainforests in the Western Ghats. In the extraction of thorium and uranium, health hazards are imposed on the communities who live near the mines. In the normal operations of these plants further health costs are borne by surrounding communities. (A study by Dr Sanghamitra and Dr Surendra Gadekar demonstrates that those living near nuclear installations in India are exposed to very high levels of radiation). Then there is the ever present threat of nuclear accidents. Finally, there is the question of the disposal of the wastes, which remain radioactive for thousands of years.

On the economic side, work by the distinguished energy scientist Amulya Reddy has shown that nuclear power in India is more costly per unit than coal, hydel, solar or other available options. (see [http://www.amulya-reddy.org.in/Publ\\_427\\_E\\_NE.htm](http://www.amulya-reddy.org.in/Publ_427_E_NE.htm)). Professor Reddy based his calculations on official statistics, these contained in the annual reports of the AEC (the only



information about the organization that ever becomes public). However, if one was to take into account the hidden subsidies that the Commission enjoys, the comparison would be even more damaging to its interests. Remarkably, despite contributing a mere 3% of the country's energy needs, more than 60% of the total research budget on energy goes to this sector. How much better served would we and the nation be if the priorities were reversed, with clean technologies like solar and wind power provided the assistance that nuclear energy currently obtains?

Finally, nuclear energy is a technology that is inherently anti-democratic. It erects a wall of secrecy between itself and the ordinary citizen. It is not subject to the scrutiny of elected legislators. It refuses even to submit itself to the peer-review of the scientific community. In response to public pressure exerted over a number of years, the Government set up an Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB), only to staff it with former employees of the AEC. No credible or independent scientist serves on it. Naturally, the AERB sees its job as merely being to whitewash the errors of its paymasters.

To these very serious limitations has now been added a new and perhaps still more serious one—that the industry is peculiarly vulnerable to terror attacks. In seeking to deflect criticism of the recent accident at Kaiga, the chairman of the Nuclear Power Corporation (NPC) told a television channel that this may have been sabotage by a 'foreign hand'. The claim only dropped more egg on his face, for if, despite all the secrecy and security, the AEC or NPC cannot prevent contamination of a single water tower, who is to say that they can ever thwart a suicide bomber or a plane flying low into one of their plants?

The Atomic Energy Commission in India is both a holy cow as well as a white elephant. Because it can, in theory, deliver atomic weapons to the state, successive Prime Ministers are loath to interfere with its workings. As a result, the taxpayer has been forced to sink billions of crores into an industry that has consistently under-performed, that after six decades of pampering still produces a niggardly proportion of our energy requirements, and this at a higher cost and at a far greater risk than the alternatives. It is past time that the industry and those who control it were made to answer for their actions. The Kaiga accident may yet help in reviving, albeit forty-two years too late, M. S. Gurupadaswamy's public-spirited demand that we seek to 'achieve greater accountability [as] to the time-schedule, production, cost, technical performance, etc' of our much cossetted and grossly over-rated nuclear industry.

## **MANIPUR TRAGEDIES**

Every Indian city has a road named after Mahatma Gandhi, each presenting in its own way a mocking thumbs-down to the Mahatma's legacy. The M. G. Road of my home town, Bangalore, is a celebration of consumerism, with its glittering array of shop-windows advertising

the most expensive goods in India. In other cities, government offices are housed on their M. G. Road, where work—or laze—politicians and officials consumed by power and corruption.

The Mahatma stood, among other things, for non-possession, integrity, and non-violence. The M. G. Road of Imphal chooses to violate the last tenet, demanding that citizens negotiate pickets of heavily armed jawans every few metres. When I visited Manipur last year, I was staying at a lodge on M. G. Road, from where I watched a boy aged not more than ten clasp the hand of his even littler sister as he walked her past the pickets on their way to school. He was terribly tense, as the urgency by which he guided his sibling along the barricades made manifest. Back in Bangalore, for my own son and his younger sister the everyday act of going to school has been wholly relaxed, and mostly enjoyable—and yet, in this other state of our shared Union, it was fraught with fear.

Exactly five years ago, in November 2004, the Prime Minister visited Manipur. He had come in response to a massive popular protest against army excesses, among them the brutalization of women. After meeting a cross-section of the population he agreed to vacate the historic Kangla Fort of armed detachments, and to ‘sympathetically consider’ the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA), under which the security forces are given wide powers to arrest without warrant and to shoot without provocation.

The opposition to AFSPA in Manipur is near-unanimous. However, by the nature and duration of her protest one individual has made her opposition distinctive. This is Irom Sharmila, a young woman who in November 2001 began an indefinite fast for the repeal of the act. (The immediate provocation was the killing, by the Assam Rifles, of ten bystanders at a village bus-stop.) Arrested for ‘attempted suicide’, she continues her fast in her hospital-cum-jail, where she does yoga, and reads religious texts, political memoirs, and folk-tales. As her biographer Deepti Priya Mehrotra points out, while the law accuses her of fasting-unto-death, Sharmila is better seen as ‘fasting unto life, to remove a brutal law that allows the murder of innocent people’.

On his return to New Delhi from Manipur, the Prime Minister set up a Committee to report on whether AFSPA should be scrapped. Headed by a respected former Judge of the Supreme Court, the Committee’s members included a highly-decorated General and a very knowledgeable journalist. The Committee’s Report is based on visits to several states, and conversations with a wide spectrum of public opinion. It makes for fascinating reading. The entire text is up on the Web; here, however, a few excerpts must suffice.

The Committee found that ‘the dominant view-point expressed by a large number of organizations/individuals was that the Act is undemocratic, harsh and discriminatory. It is applicable only to the North-Eastern States and, therefore, discriminates against the people of the region. Under the protection provided by the Act, several illegal killings, torture, molestations, rapes and extortions have taken place particularly since the Act does not provide for or create a

machinery which provides protection against the excesses committed by armed forces/para-military forces.... The Act should, therefore, be repealed.’

The Committee agreed, recommending that APSFA be taken off the statute books. It noted that with the insertion of suitable provisions in the existing Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the security needs of the state would be served without impinging on the human rights of its citizens. The ULP Act, it pointed out, permitted swift deployment of the army to combat terrorism, while simultaneously ensuring that those arrested would be handed over to the police and provided legal protection.

In making its recommendations, the Committee also offered this astute assessment of the popular discontent in the state: ‘[A]gitations such as those in Manipur and elsewhere are merely the symptoms of a malaise, which goes much deeper. The recurring phenomena of one agitation after another over various issues and the fact that public sentiments can be roused so easily and frequently to unleash unrest, confrontation and violence also points to deep-rooted causes which are often not addressed. Unless the core issues are tackled, any issue or non-issue may continue to trigger another upsurge or agitation.’

When I was in Imphal, I was driven to the Kangla Fort by a respected professor of economics. As he took me through the various shrines and memorials, he wondered when—or if—the Prime Minister would match the removal of the Assam Rifles from Kangla with a repeal of the APSFA. Only that, he felt, would signal that the Government of India treated the residents of Manipur as full and equal citizens. As the professor put it, ‘if you love a people, do so wholly—not half-heartedly’.

APSPA was first enacted in parts of Manipur in 1960. Even from a narrow security point of view it does not seem to have worked, for the discontent and the violence have only escalated in the decades it has been in operation. It is past time that it is done away with. A generous deadline for its repeal might be November 2010—before the tenth anniversary of Irom Sharmila’s fast, which, as matters presently stand, may be the only thing Gandhian about the whole state of Manipur.

### **THE HONEST LEFTIST**

In a recent lecture, delivered in Mumbai in memory of Nani Palkhivala, the Home Minister, Mr P. Chidambaram, attacked ‘left-leaning intellectuals’ and ‘human rights groups’, who in his view ‘plead the naxalite cause ignoring the violence unleashed by the naxalites on innocent men, women and children.’ ‘Why are the human rights groups silent?’, asked the Home Minister.

The short answer is that they aren't, and haven't been, silent. There are very many intellectuals and rights activists who have regularly condemned—in newspapers as well as in specialist journals—Maoist methods such as the recruitment of juveniles as militants, the indiscriminate use of landmines, the killings of alleged informers, and the murders of forest guards and police constables who cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be dubbed 'class enemies'.

It may just be that Mr Chidambaram is new to the job, and that in his previous assignments his reading chiefly consisted of business magazines and stock market reports. It seems that he has been ill served by his assistants, who are paid precisely to avoid their Ministers making such obvious factual mistakes in public.

If this assumption is correct, then the deficiencies can be remedied easily enough, by the Home Minister being asked to read the writings of an intellectual who died the very week of his Palkhivala lecture. His name was K. Balagopal. Balagopal was described (by a younger friend) as 'the conscience of the collective self known as Andhra society'—with reason, as for thirty years and more his chief focus of work and writing had been the politics and culture of his home state. However, he was revered outside Andhra Pradesh, too—in Kashmir, which he once referred to as the 'only foreign country I have visited'; in Chattisgarh, where he was among the first to document the excesses of the vigilante movement that goes under the name of Salwa Judum; in Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai and other cities, where his work for human rights was admired by those who sought to emulate him while knowing that they could never match his intellectual originality or his physical and moral courage.

Indians active in human rights usually come from a humanistic background—they are most often lawyers, social scientists, or journalists. Among the exceptions are the man who founded the first human rights organization in independent India—the engineer, Kapil Bhattacharya—and Balagopal. After taking a Ph D in mathematics from Warangal, Balagopal taught for several years at Kakatiya University. Then, in the mid 1980s, he was forced to quit his job, and turned to working full-time on civil liberties. In the late 1990s he acquired a law degree; now, his vocation complemented his activism, for the cases he fought in court were usually on behalf of subaltern groups victimized or harassed by the state.

In person, Balagopal could appear forbiddingly austere. Small talk and invocation of common friends got one nowhere—as I discovered when we were once placed on a panel together. But it was enough to hear him speak, and more so, to read him in print. His fellow Andhras read him in Telugu; the rest of us, in the Economic and Political Weekly, where he wrote regularly from the early 1980s until his death. His English prose was direct and economical—as befitting a mathematician, although I am told that in his own language he would allow himself an occasional flourish, as befitting the grandson of a major Telugu poet.

Like some others of his generation, Balgopal was powerfully shaped by the Emergency, against whose authoritarian excesses it was then automatic to juxtapose the youthful idealism of the

Naxalites. And it was undeniably the case that in his native Andhra only the Naxalites worked among the very poor—such as the sharecroppers and landless labourers of Telengana, and the poor and often destitute tribals of the Agency areas.

Over the years, Balagopal arrived at a less romantic view of the Naxalites. He deplored their cult of violence in articles in English and, perhaps more effectively, in articles in Telugu that were directed at and read by the objects of his criticism. In the late 1990s, he wrote a brilliant essay that anatomized the means, foul and often brutal, used by Maoists to enhance their power and dominance over recalcitrant individuals and groups. (In what follows, I rely on a translation by the historian Rajagopal Vakulabharanam.) Here, Balagopal dealt in detail with various cases of harassment, intimidation and murder practiced by Maoist groups in Andhra Pradesh. He wrote that ‘we should publicly interrogate those who claim for themselves the right to kill for the sake of “progress” and the wisdom to define what is progress. We need not hesitate to critique those those who do not hesitate to usurp the rights of others, including their right to live, for the sake of revolution’. If ‘Naxalites had any respect for the humanistic values or the sentiments of those close to whom they kill’, he remarked, ‘they will not kill them by smashing their faces in such a way that they are virtually unrecognizable’.

To be sure, Balagopal also wrote often (and perhaps more often) of crimes and errors on the other side, of how the police and paramilitary brutalized innocent citizens in the name of Law and Order, of how politicians and industrialists seized the land of poor peasants in the name of promoting ‘Development’ while in fact lining their own pockets. In his last years, he was particularly active in opposing the acquisition of farmland for Special Economic Zones in Andhra Pradesh. In sum, Balagopal refused to accept, from either state or Maoist, the justification of ‘a culture and mentality which celebrates power and use of force in society’.

Balagopal was that altogether rare animal, a genuinely independent Indian intellectual, whose moral clarity and commitment to the truth meant that he could not resort to special pleading for any party or interest. The flawed institutions of our imperfect democracy were all subject to his rigorous scanner—the police, the judiciary, the bureaucracy, and not least, corrupt and authoritarian politicians. When Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy was first elected Chief Minister, Balagopal wrote that while a pliant media sought to clothe him with ‘the image of a good doctor who has turned to politics to cure society’, in truth YSR was ‘anything but a vendor of humane visages. His rise to power has been accompanied by more bloodshed than that of any other politician in this state’. As it happens, he was also among the first to see through YSR’s predecessor, pointing out that ‘Chandrababu [Naidu] is merely an ambitious political schemer who has managed to con quite a lot of intelligent people because he knows their hunger for the image he has put on—a third world politician in the mould of a corporate executive spewing IT jargon and the verbiage of the World Bank’s development policy prejudices—is too acute for the normal functioning of their other senses’.

Those concerned with the security of the state often criticize human rights workers for living in an ivory tower, for not knowing the law, and for making excuses for the Naxalites. When (or if) made against Balagopal, none of these charges held any water. He knew rural India intimately: a tireless fieldworker, he had explored, on foot or in crowded buses, almost every district of Andhra as well as many districts in Chattisgarh, Orissa, and Kashmir. He was extremely well acquainted with the Indian Penal Code as well as the Constitution, and hence could pinpoint how, and in what measure, had the state violated its own laws. And no one could accuse him of being a Maoist apologist.

His friends and readers shall mourn Balagopal's death, at the comparatively young age of fifty-seven. On the other hand, the ideologues and leaders of the Maoist movement are probably quite relieved at his passing. That caveat 'probably' can be dispensed with when it comes to the Andhra police, Andhra politicians, and the Union Home Ministry. For the most credible critic of their crimes and impunities has unexpectedly been removed from their midst.

### **KASHMIR PAST AND PRESENT**

Sorting out some papers, I came across an old essay in an obscure periodical on a topic of contemporary relevance. Published in December 1973 in the Sarvodaya journal Bhoodan-Yagya, it was written (in Hindi) by Chandi Prasad Bhatt, the pioneer of the Chipko Andolan and, arguably, of modern Indian environmentalism itself. I have known Bhatt for many years, and have come to greatly admire his understanding of agrarian issues, and at the same time to greatly deplore the neglect of his work by the media and the public at large. However, the essay I speak of was not about his chosen themes, environmentalism and sustainable development—rather, it dealt with politics and society in what was then, and what is now, a very troubled part of India.

It was in April 1973 that the Chipko movement began in the Alakananda valley under Bhatt's leadership. In November of that year, he went with a fellow Garhwali named Karim Khan to Kashmir, ostensibly to study the condition of the forests and the rights of villagers in their produce. As it turned out, the account of his journeys did not mention forests at all. For he had entered the Valley at a time of deep discontent, with students protesting in the streets against the policies of an unpopular state government. In the bus that Khan and Bhatt took to Srinagar, they were advised to sit in the aisles, lest a stone thrown by an angry demonstrator break the windows and injure them. It was also suggested that, as a Hindu and a Muslim respectively, they eat in separate restaurants.

No sooner had they entered the capital of Jammu and Kashmir that the Garhwali travellers came across a crowd shouting pro-Pakistan slogans. This is how Chandi Prasad Bhatt described (in my inadequate English translation) the scene in Sringar's Lal Chowk:

‘Taxis, cars and buses lay stalled on the road, their tyres punctured or their windows shattered. The police were there in force but they looked on idly, perhaps not wanting to mess with the demonstrators. As the day proceeded the violence intensified. At about four in the afternoon the crowd decided to attack and destroy a hotel as well as a printing press. Scattering a hail of stones this crowd then proceeded to the Amir Kadal crossing. As they walked they shouted slogans in favour of Pakistan. When they reached Amir Kadal they tried to set a bridge on fire. They were prevented from doing so by the arrival of a platoon of the Central Reserve Police Force, which also succeeded in dispersing the protesters’.

Later in the evening, while walking through the mohalla of Ganpatiyar, the visitor came across what he sardonically described as a ‘majedar tamasha’, namely, women standing on roof-tops raining down stones on the police.

Bhatt titled his travelogue ‘Kashmir Ke Do Roop: Ek Ashant aur Ek Shant’ (The Two Faces of Kashmir—One Troubled, the Other Peaceful). For there was indeed another side to the Valley, this manifest in the industry and enterprise of peasants and craftspeople. Travelling through the countryside, Bhatt met kesar (saffron) farmers who made a good living from the cultivation and export of the spice. Other landholders profitably grew fruit and vegetables. Meanwhile, his fellow Gandhians were actively promoting silk cultivation and sheep rearing. One outfit of the Khadi and Gramadyog Commission claimed an annual turn-over of Rs 20 lakhs (a considerable sum back in 1973, and not a trifling amount now either). Then there were the cottage industries—carpentry, the making of cricket bats, shawl weaving, etc.—all of which seemed to be in fine shape.

‘Where the scene in Srinagar was characterized by daily fights and processions’, remarked Bhatt, ‘on the other hand the atmosphere in these villages was marked by peace and tranquility’. Where ‘in one Kashmir stones were being thrown and bullets being fired’, he continued, ‘in the other Kashmir exquisite pashmina and jamawar shawls were being made and sold’.

What has changed in Kashmir since this essay was published thirty-five years ago? Urban discontent remains, expressed as before by young men as well as middle-aged women. But the villages are not as placid and peaceful as they might once have been. Peasants and artisans seem to be as disenchanted as the townsfolk. Among a wide swathe of the population, there exists a deep yearning for greater political freedom. These sentiments are assiduously stoked by Pakistan; still, one would be foolish to ascribe them wholly or even principally to the designs of our neighbour. Increasingly, the pro-Pakistani slogans that Chandi Prasad Bhatt heard in 1973 have been replaced by pro-azadi ones.

On the security side, the police and the CRPF that Bhatt saw in operation have been augmented in massive numbers by detachments of the Army. For all this, there remain two sides to Kashmir—thus, in between periods of protest, the people have voted energetically in state and national elections. The desire for political freedom is sometimes superseded by the desire for

dignified employment—as in the hero's welcome accorded the software entrepreneur N. R. Narayana Murthy when he visited Kashmir University some years ago. The challenge, in 2009 as in 1973, remains the same: namely, the conversion of the currency of identity to that of interest, such that the people of the Kashmir Valley may come—in a political as well as economic sense—to acquire a real stake in the Republic of India.

## **THE GLOBALIZING GERONTOCRACY**

In the sixty years since Independence, there have been three periods in which India has faced serious challenges in the sphere of foreign policy. In the late 1940s, we were being asked to take sides in the Cold War, then about to get hot. Then, in the early 1970s, the crisis in East Pakistan forced us to do what we had wisely refused to in the 1940s, namely, actually align with one superpower rather than remain equidistant from both.

The third period in which our foreign policy making skills are being severely tested is the present. We live in a disturbed neighbourhood. Pakistan is beset by the rise of the Taliban and the insurgency in Balochistan. Sri Lanka has just come through a bloody civil war, with no guarantee of a stable peace. Nepal is stumbling insecurely along the path of constitutional democracy. The democratic system in Bangladesh is threatened on the one side by the military and on the other by Islamic radicals.

We also live in a global world of ever shifting alliances. The United States still seeks to be the sole superpower, but its claims are being challenged by a rising China, a combative Russia, and a less than deferential European Union. Meanwhile, relations between nations, big and small, are compounded by new problems. Once, bilateral ties dealt chiefly with economic, political, and cultural issues. These remain, but to them have been added the threats of terrorism and climate change.

Given the instability in the neighbourhood, and the complex global scenario, it might be that our challenges are even more daunting than in the past. In this context, it is worth investigating the background of the three men who have primary responsibility for our foreign policy. These are the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh; the Foreign Minister, S. M. Krishna; and the National Security Adviser, M. K. Narayanan.

Two things are common to these men—their age, and their relative lack of experience in foreign policy. S. M. Krishna is seventy-seven years old. He has never before served in an Union Cabinet. His political career has been spent wholly in his home state, Karnataka, where he held office as Deputy Chief Minister and Chief Minister (he later also served a term as Governor of Maharashtra). Nearly fifty years ago he did a Master's degree in an American university; however, his professional acquaintance with global or international matters since has been slight.



M. K. Narayanan is seventy-five. Unlike his predecessors as NSA (such as J. N. Dixit and Brajesh Mishra), he does not come from a Foreign Service background. A career officer of the Indian Police Service, he ended as the Director of the Intelligence Bureau. Like Mr Krishna, his lack of experience in the field is conspicuous. Indeed, some have put it more strongly, arguing that Mr Narayanan's police background promotes a tunnel vision that impedes a wider understanding of regional and global forces.

The Foreign Minister and the NSA both report to the Prime Minister. Dr Manmohan Singh certainly has a more global orientation than his colleagues, a product of the years spent working for international organizations, and of his own interest as an economist in trade and liberalization. He is less insular than some other Prime Ministers (V. P. Singh and Deve Gowda come to mind); yet he is not as personally interested or invested in foreign policy as some others (such as Jawaharlal Nehru). Also going against him is his age (he will turn seventy-seven in September), and his health—after two heart by-pass surgeries, he cannot as easily stand the strain of regular foreign travel as a man twenty years younger. Finally, unlike the NSA and the Foreign Minister he has many other things on his plate.

By way of comparison, consider the ages of those with principal responsibility for foreign policy in other countries. Hillary Clinton is sixty-one. The British Foreign Secretary, David Milliband is forty-four, his German counterpart, Frank-Walter Steinmeier nine years older. Also fifty-three years of age is the Pakistani Foreign Minister, Makhdoom Qureshi. I suspect that the equivalent of our National Security Adviser in these (and other countries) is likewise in his fifties or sixties. Age apart, the videshi equivalents of our Foreign Minister and NSA often also have better credentials in the field.

To work in foreign affairs or national security requires one to be awake at all hours and alert to all possibilities, to be comfortable with modern technology and to be interested even in obscure parts of the world, and, finally, to be willing to travel long distances at the drop of a hat. To be sure, youth by itself does not qualify one to be a good diplomat, foreign policy expert, or strategic thinker. (Consider the callowness of David Milliband). Energy and alertness do need to be accompanied by wisdom and experience. But the latter without the former can be equally unhelpful. A useful rule of thumb may be—to get someone more than fifty, but less than seventy.

At the risk of being accused of 'age-ism', one must ask whether the recent misjudgements in our dealings with Pakistan and the United States are completely unconnected with the age of our principal negotiators. For the worrying thing is that the Prime Minister, the Foreign Minister, and the National Security Adviser are all the wrong side of seventy-five. In the rocky ocean of global politics, the Indian ship of state can carry one old man, perhaps even two, but three?

Tags: foreign policy, governance, India Pakistan, M K Narayanan, Manmohan

## NO GLOATING, SCAPEGOATING

Every year, in November, the American magazine Newsweek departs from its focus on current events to publish a special number which examines national and regional trends that cannot be slotted within the weekly cycle of news. Writing in the last such issue, the editor of a Delhi newspaper (not this one) wrote that ‘Indian foreign policy is no longer focused exclusively on Pakistan’s external actions—and how to thwart them. Delhi today is more concerned with what happens inside Pakistan and how to help Indians and Pakistanis both feel more secure, stable and prosperous. While the Indian government shares Washington’s concerns about terrorism, it also shares an interest in Pakistan’s well-being. Six decades of animosity are coming to an end’.

Prophecy is best left to astrologers. For, a few days after this article was published, terrorists based in Pakistan attacked Mumbai. In the weeks and months since that brutal attack, Indian foreign policy has been largely focused on Pakistan. Far from ‘coming to an end’, the animosity has intensified. Abuse and accusation have become the preferred mode of conversation between the diplomats and politicians of both countries.

Post Mumbai, and post the terror attacks on Sri Lankan cricketers in Lahore, there has been some amount of gloating by Indians in the press and in cyberspace. The latest outrage in Pakistan’s most beautiful (and cultured) city will doubtless provoke more gloating still. Businessmen, politicians, editors, will all remind us that India is NOT Pakistan, that we are a stable multi-religious democracy rather than a failing state plagued by fundamentalists.

It has been said of Pakistan that its main problems are Allah, the Army, and America. Of these three impediments India is not entirely free of at least two. Instead of Allah we have Ram, that other mythical figure around whom politicians seek to divide people and climb on their backs to power. Through the 1980s and the 1990s, the misuse of the name of this Great God caused great damage to India and Indians. And the danger is not yet past—consider the alacrity with which the Bharatiya Janata Party has jumped to the defence of its Ram-loving (and simultaneously Muslim-hating) candidate from Pilibhit.

If India, unlike Pakistan, has succeeded in keeping the Army away from politics, this is in part because of good luck. Had Jinnah and Liaquat lived as long as Nehru, perhaps they too might have succeeded in establishing the supremacy of elected officials over men in uniform. It may also be that the Indian Army has decided that it would be too messy a business to assume power—which, in this large, diverse, and far-flung country, would require not one coup, but twenty-eight, one for each of the States of the Republic.

As for America, we are only now learning to distinguish its attractions from its seductions. A section of the Indian elite are keen for us to replace Pakistan as Washington’s pliant follower in South Asia. They see material advantages—markets for Indian goods, for example. And they see strategic advantage—a bulwark against the other rising Asian nation, China. In my view,

however, we would be as foolish to uncritically follow the American Government now as it was to mindlessly oppose them in the past. The United States is known to be a fair-weather friend—flattering and wooing us today, they could just as easily dump us tomorrow.

We share, with Pakistan, an increasingly corrupt civil service, a brutal police, and political parties that are in effect family firms. And then we have problems that are all our own—as for example a left-wing insurgency that is active and influential across one-tenth of the country’s land mass. The state of Pakistan should thus promote not self-satisfaction, but a critical look within. For there, but for the grace of the Indian Constitution, go we.

We would be unwise to gloat over our neighbour’s predicament. On their part, Pakistan and Pakistanis might consider giving up on their standard scapegoat for the state of Indo-Pak relations, namely, Kashmir. For it is Pakistan’s obsession with delivering the Valley from Indian rule that is responsible in good measure for their own predicament. The Islamicization of Pakistani society that General Zia-ul-Haq began has proceeded apace since his death, aided by the proliferation of insurgent groups promising the public that they will successfully redeem the letter K in the name of the nation.

When I was in Lahore this past January, I met several Pakistanis who could see no inconsistency between their opposition to terrorism and their support to the jihadis in Kashmir. If the attack on Mumbai did not give them pause, then surely the two recent attacks in their own city will. Liberal, cosmopolitan, Pakistanis have been complicit in the growth of Islamic fundamentalism in their country, not directly, but indirectly, by permitting the alibi of Kashmir to cover up the camps and madrassas that have sprung up across the Punjab, indoctrinating the young to wreak acts of terror.

The prophet quoted at the beginning of this article was mistaken—six decades of animosity between India and Pakistan are not coming to an end. Withal, we must try and make sure that the animosities do not deepen further. A start can be made, on our side, by not gloating over their plight; and, on theirs, by recognizing the direct and inseparable link between the jihad in Kashmir and the rise of fundamentalism in Pakistan.

### **THEIR FIRST FAMILY AND OURS**

Driving down the Mall in Lahore, I saw a large poster mixing familiar faces with those that were less familiar. There was the current Pakistani President, Asif Ali Zardari, wearing spectacles; next to him, but looming larger in the frame, his late wife Benazir Bhutto, her head covered with a chunni. Two others I recognized were the dynasty’s founder, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, broad-shouldered and bald; and the dynasty’s putative heir, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, young, fresh-faced, and confused.

These four faces dominated the poster; but who were the smaller, lesser, people who made up, so to say, the extras? Since the lettering was in Urdu (a language I do not read) I could not decipher their names. But from experience of similar visuals this side of the border I could make an educated guess. The lesser men in the frame must have been local, Lahore-and-Punjab-based, politicians of the Pakistan's Peoples Party, obliged to put up posters of their leaders to proclaim their loyalty and thus provide legitimacy for their own names and careers. In this respect they were wholly akin to district and state level functionaries of the Congress party in India, who, before an election or when their bosses came visiting, make haste to install hoardings where their own faces, writ small, nestle behind and beyond the larger portraits of Indira, Rajiv, Sonia, and Rahul Gandhi.

On my last visit to Pakistan I was often alerted to the similarities between their political style and ours. Thus, on successive days, I encountered evidence on the printed page that consolidated and deepened the impression garnered from that telling poster on the Mall in Lahore. I flew out of India on the 5th of January, which, coincidentally, was the 81st birth anniversary of the founder of the Pakistan Peoples Party. That day's Dawn newspaper had a piece entitled 'Z. A. Bhutto Remembered', and written by a Member of the Sindh Assembly. The writer said of the dead man that he 'gave the people the courage to stand up to the high and mighty and confront any dictator and oppressor'; that he 'was the architect of a new foreign policy which gave Pakistan a new identity among the comity of nations'; that 'we have not produced so far anyone to match his wisdom, vision, commitment and achievement, [but] his daughter, the late Benazir Bhutto, was next only to him in her struggle for the rights of all the people of all the provinces of Pakistan'; that 'his name remains engraved on the hearts of the downtrodden, and his voice is always recognised as the voice of the oppressed of Pakistan'; and that 'the need of the time is to implement the democratic philosophy of Z[ulfiqar] A[li] B[hutto] to solve the existing problems. The Bhuttos are gone but their legacy will continue for ever'.

The next day, I read an even more fulsome tribute published in the Daily Times of Lahore, this written not by a lowly provincial politician but by a serving Cabinet Minister. In a signed article, extending over three whole columns, Sherry Rehman—currently serving as the Minister for Information and Broadcasting in the Pakistan Government—extolled the life and legacy of one she referred to throughout as Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (or SZAB). She claimed that for SZAB, 'people's empowerment was a cause so important that he refused to make any compromises even when his life was at stake; that his 'model for people-oriented political order opened a definitive chapter for Pakistan's politics'; that he 'drew an entire political class, from the darkness of the urban ghetto and the dirt-poor village, into the sunshine of public life'; that he 'devoted all his energies to the implementation of the pledges he made to the public that voted him to power'; that his 'contributions to an impregnable Pakistan stand tall in the form of major industrial, commercial and military establishments that still serve as the backbone of the country's economy'; that he 'gave Pakistan the strongest institutional foundations by drawing up the 1973 Constitution, and building the consensus so vital to democratic processes in its signing';

that ‘Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his daughter Shaheed Mohtarma Benazir Bhutto, two leaders of global stature, both snuffed out in the prime of their lives, continue to stand relevant to Pakistan’s politics’; that ‘the two Bhuttos brought a consistent strain of democratic politics into the tumultuous history of Pakistani politics’; and finally, that ‘it is the Bhutto ethos that has given our government the integrity, commitment and the courage to fight the onerous challenges in the way of a stable

Pakistan’.

There are serving Cabinet Ministers in the Government of India who have written (or spoken) in similar fashion about Indira, Rajiv and Sonia Gandhi. Any progress or achievement, modest or substantial, that India or Indians might have achieved in any sphere is attributed to their wisdom and foresight. On the other hand, no weakness or error is ever admitted. Fortunately, the field is not entirely filled with self-serving chamchas; writers with no axe to grind, no career to protect or advance, have given us their own, independent, assessments of these politicians and their legacies. In the case of the Bhuttos, we can thus juxtapose, to the paeans of praise above, some excerpts from Tariq Ali’s recent book *The Duel*. The author says of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s five years in power that ‘self-defense, self-love, self-preservation, and sycophancy became the overpowering characteristics of his administration’. He adds that ‘a personality-driven, autocratic style of governance had neutered the spirit of Bhutto’s party, encouraged careerists, and finally paved the way for his enemies. He was the victim of a grave injustice; his death removed all the warts and transformed him into a martyr... The tragedy led to the PPP’s being treated as a family heirloom, which was unhealthy for both party and country’.

As a student of modern Indian history, I can confirm that this characterization can largely serve for the Congress and its first family, too. Indira Gandhi’s regime was likewise marked by sycophancy and self-preservation, the two coming together with deadly effect in the Emergency. Her style of administration was autocratic. However, these and other deficiencies have been retrospectively annulled by the brutal manner of her death. Her martyrdom permitted her politically under-qualified son to succeed her; later, his own violent death at the hands of terrorists consolidated the claims of the family to the reins of the Congress, an identification which, here like there, has unquestionably been ‘unhealthy for both party and country’.

Like Bhutto and Benazir, Indira and Rajiv met violent deaths. However, while they encouraged sycophancy in their lifetime, they were perhaps not quite as consumed by self-love as the Bhuttos, father and daughter. Sonia Gandhi is nowhere near as base, vulgar, corrupt or malevolent as Asif Ali Zardari. And the jury is still out on Rahul (as it must be on Bilawal).

In terms of personal likeability the advantage may rest with the Indians. But in terms of structure and process the two parties, and nations, are wholly comparable. The parallels between the PPP and the Congress are at once striking as well as depressing. Here, like there, the ruling party and government is dominated by a single family. The political culture is thus steeped in a deference

and sycophancy that sits oddly with nations proclaiming to be democratic and parties professing to be egalitarian and modern.

### **CHAUVINISTS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!**

In a recent essay in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, the political scientist Neil DeVotta quotes a Sri Lankan Government Minister as saying: ‘The Sinhalese are the only organic race of Sri Lanka. Other communities are all visitors to the country, whose arrival was never challenged out of the compassion of the Buddhists. But they must not take this compassion for granted. The Muslims are here because our kings let them trade here and the Tamils because they were allowed to take refuge when the Moguls were invading them in India. What is happening today is pure ingratitude on the part of these visitors’.

Commenting on these and other such statements made down the years, DeVotta says they form part of a ‘nationalist narrative that combines jeremiad with chauvinism’. In this narrative, ‘the Sinhalese only have Sri Lanka while the island’s other minorities have homelands elsewhere; Sri Lanka is surrounded by envious enemies who loathe the Sinhalese; those living across the Palk Straits in Tamil Nadu especially those who want to overtake the island; and NGOs, Christian missionaries, human rights groups, and various western powers and their organisations conspire to tarnish the image of the Sinhalese Buddhists and thereby assist the LTTE. Those who subscribe to this narrative are patriots; the rest are traitors’.

Although DeVotta does not make the comparison himself, in reading the sentences he quotes, as well as his own analysis, I was irresistibly reminded of the rhetoric used by the majority chauvinists of my own country. The main ideologues of the tendency known as Hindutva, such as V. D. Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar, have argued that Hindus, and Hindus alone, were the true, original, and rightful inhabitants of the land known as Bharat. In their view, the other communities were latecomers or interlopers, whose presence here was permitted only because of the ‘tolerance’ of the Hindus. Regrettably, these minorities—Muslims, Christians, etc—were often not grateful enough to the majority. Hence the need to periodically issue them a warning.

In the perspective of the chauvinist, a proper, good, and reliable Sri Lankan must apparently be a Tamil-hating or at least Tamil-distrusting Sinhala. Change a word or two, substituting ‘Indian’ for ‘Sri Lankan’, ‘Muslim’ for ‘Tamil’, and ‘Hindu’ for ‘Sinhala’, and you arrive, more-or-less, at the core beliefs of Hindutva. The parallels run further still. Consider the strong element of paranoia that characterizes the Hindu as much as the Sinhala chauvinist. Thus the Sinhala bigot venerates the memory (or the myth) of a king named Dute gemunu, who back in the 2nd century B. C.. is believed—or alleged—to have defeated a Tamil king. The exploits—real or imagined—of Shivaji and Rana Pratap serve the same symbolic purpose for the Hindu bigot, which is to invoke a militantly nationalistic past in which the foreigner or invader was humbled or killed.

In India, as in Sri Lanka, the myths of the past inform the poisonously practical politics of the present. Thus the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh also rants on about the various western powers out to demean and defeat Bharat Mata; it also reserves a particular opprobrium for NGOs and human rights groups. But it goes further—singling out, as particular enemies of the Hindu nation, those independent-minded intellectuals whom they deem to be in thrall to the unholy Western Trinity of Marx, Mill and Macaulay. (Since there is no substantial intellectual class in Sri Lanka, the Sinhala bigots can, fortunately for them, claim one enemy less.)

To be sure, similar forms of chauvinism can be found in other countries as well. In South Asia itself, the Islamists in Bangladesh and Pakistan consider their chief enemy within to be the Muslim liberal who engages with the West; and their chief enemy without to be the malign Hindus of India, here accused of conspiring to keep the Islamic umma from claiming its rightful place. Looking further afield, we have those Americans—such as the late political scientist Samuel Huntington—who claim that only those who speak English, celebrate the achievements of the West, and have an allegiance to the Christian creed can count as wholly reliable citizens of the United States of America.

Many years ago, the great Kannada writer Sivarama Karanth insisted that it was impossible ‘to talk of ‘Indian culture as if it is a monolithic object’. ‘Indian culture today’, he pointed out, ‘is so varied as to be called “cultures”’. The roots of this culture go back to ancient times: and it has developed through contact with many races and peoples. Hence, among its many ingredients, it is impossible to say surely what is native and what is alien, what is borrowed out of love and what has been imposed by force. If we view Indian culture thus, we realise that there is no place for chauvinism.’

These words need to be read afresh in India. But, as the civil war in Sri Lanka nears its end, they need to be read and heeded across the Palk Straits too. Far from being ‘the only organic race’ of their island, the Sinhala almost certainly migrated there from eastern India. In any case, in later centuries the culture of the island has been influenced and enriched by many races and peoples, among them Tamils, Arabs, the Dutch, the Portuguese, and the British, who in religious terms were variously Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Parsi, and atheist as well as Buddhist. The LTTE are a terrorist organization—it is impossible to defend them. However, if their defeat at the hands of the Sri Lankan army leads to a consolidation of Sinhala chauvinism, it will be impossible to defend that, too.

## FOREIGN CERTIFICATES

I recently wrote a piece in a Delhi magazine about a Bangalore-based holy man lobbying for the Nobel Peace Prize. Among the mails I received was one which enclosed, as proof of the holy man's holiness, the English translation of an article in an obscure Finnish weekly which praised him and his works. My article had made it plain that I too counted Bangalore as my home town and place of residence. Why then did the correspondent suppose that I would place the verdict of a Finnish magazine above the evidence of my own eyes?

This exchange confirmed, once again, a theory I have long held about our self-proclaimed patriots—that the more Indian and the more Hindu they claim to be, the more they seek and need certificates from white men. At the height of the Ayodhya movement, the Sangh Parivar circulated, at vast expense, the writings of an obscure Belgian ex-priest which claimed that Hindus had been victimized for thousands of years by Muslims and Christians, and that destroying a mosque, building a temple in its place, and sacrificing thousands of (mostly innocent) lives along the way was the only way that this cumulative historical injustice could be avenged.

This ex-priest had little training as a historian, and even less credibility. But unlike the other similarly untrained ideologues of the Hindu right, his citizenship was not Indian, but Belgian. The hope was that the colour of his skin would trump the shallowness of his arguments.

As it happens, the hunger for foreign, and specifically Western, certifications runs deep among the Indian left as well. In 1991, the Government of India initiated a wideranging policy of market-friendly economic reforms. The argument for these reforms was that they would stimulate innovation and productivity, and hence incomes and jobs; the argument against them, that they would enrich only a small section of the population and widen social inequalities. It was a debate well worth pursuing, for there was (and is) something to be said for both sides.

In the first few years of the reforms, the polemics were particularly intense. Then they seemed to die down, in part because the media put its not inconsiderable weight behind the opening up of the economy. Now, in a bid to revive the debate and shore up the credibility of the anti-free-marketeers, the Indian Marxists invited a white man to come speak for their side. Unlike the Hindutva-leaning Belgian ex-priest, he was a figure of some intellectual significance, a Professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, no less.

The chair that this man commanded at the MIT was in the field of Linguistics. It was a professorship he had earned many times over, for he had transformed our understanding of how humans acquire the elements of language and how they communicate it. In later years, this man had turned from scientific studies of language to activist analyses of international politics. In this sphere his writings were more controversial—while some admired him for exposing the imperialist intent of American foreign policy, others pointed out that in criticizing his



government he had sometimes come close to defending the indefensible actions of countries other than the United States.

Anyway, Noam Chomsky—to give the man his name—had two rather different intellectual reputations, of which the one in political commentary was somewhat more contested than the one in linguistics. However, in the field of economic analysis he had no reputation at all. Moreover, he had never visited India and knew no Indian language. These twin disadvantages did not deter his Indian hosts, nor, it must be said, did they deter Chomsky himself. He visited a few cities in India, met a few English-speaking left-wing intellectuals, and professed himself satisfied as to the utter unsuitability of the economic reforms in India.

Like the extreme ends of the spectrum, the political centre too is scarcely immune from the search for Western approval. At about the same time that Noam Chomsky visited India, Jeffrey Sachs, then a Professor at the equally prestigious Harvard University, came here at the invitation of the Congress-led Government in New Delhi. After a few conversations in hotels and offices in the capital, he spoke out, as his hosts naturally expected him to do, in favour of the reforms.

Admittedly, as a professor of economics rather than linguistics, Sachs was slightly better qualified than Chomsky in this particular field of enquiry. The operative word here may be ‘slightly’: for Sachs too had no knowledge of India, while his previous experience of foreign consulting had been to advise the post-Soviet Government to undertake the ‘shock therapy’ of going from total state control to total state withdrawal, a policy which had quite disastrous consequences.

Why do Indians, of all shades of opinion, left, right and centre, so desperately seek approval, for their actions and their prejudices, for their policies and their politics, from white men of uncertain knowledge and credibility? I ask this question not out of arrogance but in humility—for as a writer who lives in India, I am not wholly immune from this craving myself.

## **RENEWING THE POLICE**

On a sunny Sunday this past September, a friend and I were walking in central London, headed towards the south bank of the Thames. We were enjoying the scenery and the weather, when, at a road running along St. James’s Park, we came across thousands of men, women, and children on bicycles. So far as the eye could see, there were Britons pedalling away, Britons of all ages and classes and colours. As the line went by, we waited—impatiently, since we were Indians—for the police to spot a breach in the flood of pedallers and allow us pedestrians to cross the road.

A charity had organized this cycle yatra, in aid of funds for Aids or some such noble cause. As I crossed the cyclists, the thought struck me that they constituted a suitable target for a terror

attack. But then I looked more carefully, to see that the possibility had been anticipated, and protected for. Apart from the cops at the pedestrian crossings, there were other cops at intervals of about a hundred yards, equipped with walkie-talkies, and possibly also with concealed guns. The policemen were at hand to husband the charity cyclists through this vast and teeming city, and to spot and tackle any passers-by who might seek, in any way, to disrupt them.

A week after this walk in London I was in the Bangalore Cantonment railway station, waiting for a relative to arrive from out-of-town. With me were very many others, who had likewise come into the station without buying a platform ticket. Earlier in the year, the city had been subject to a wave of bomb blasts, and this unpoliced station seemed a sitting duck for another. What if one of the people on the platform placed a packet on a bench, containing a bomb timed to explode just as the train arrived at the platform? The question entered my mind, and prompted a sense of insecurity. It was not until I had picked my relative off the train and bundled her into my car that I felt that I had regained control over my life.

That day in Bangalore, there was not a policeman or security guard in sight at the station, but even if there had been I doubt I would have felt more secure. On the other hand, the sight of those ten or twenty policemen in London was most reassuring to me, as it must have been to the cyclists as well.

Why does a visitor to London trust the police, when even a long-time resident of Bangalore has reservations about the guardians of law and order in his city? This difference has nothing to do with genetics and culture, but all to do with politics and history. If the London policeman is more honest, more efficient, more alert and awake than his Bangalore counterpart, this is because he is part of a system that does not brook interference by the politician or discrimination according to ethnicity and religion.

The head of Scotland Yard does not have to be the personal favourite of the Prime Minister. The Mayor of London has no hand in the selection of the chief of the city's police force. Promotion and preferment within the British police are a reward for performance and ability. On the other hand, one can be certain that the Police Commissioners of Bangalore, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Lucknow are handpicked by the Chief Ministers of the states in which these cities are located. The choices may be dictated by the fact that Minister and Commissioner belong to the same caste, subscribe to the same political ideology, or have a common love of the game of cricket.

This politicization of the Indian police is by no means restricted to jobs in state capitals. An M. L. A. or M. P. often decides who shall be posted as the Superintendent of Police in the district in which his constituency falls. The most prestigious and powerful jobs in the police are allocated, as often as not, on the basis of kin and caste. At other times they are bid for in the open market. In some states Chief Ministers are said to have demanded, and obtained, lakhs or even crores of rupees in return for posting an officer to a district or division of his choice.

Once the top jobs are decided on considerations other than competence, it is hard to prevent lesser jobs being allocated in the same manner. So inspectors and station head officers and constables are also often chosen on the basis of caste, religion, favouritism, or bribery. Down the line, this puts a premium on the policeman pleasing the man (or Minister) who appointed him to his post, rather than focusing on his main job, which is the protection of the ordinary citizen. It also encourages corruption, the desire to make hay before one is suddenly divested of one's responsibilities when a government changes, an M. P. fails to win re-election, or the boss retires.

In this manner, we have systematically run down and degraded a vital apparatus of our state and our democracy. We have encouraged fragility and insecurity among our police officers, these feelings passed on to the citizens they are mandated to protect. In a directive issued in September 2005, the Supreme Court drew attention to the causes (and consequences) of this degradation. 'The popular perception all over the country', remarked the Court, 'appears to be that many of the deficiencies in the functioning of the police have arisen largely due to a dose of unhealthy and petty political interference at various levels starting from transfer and posting of policemen of different ranks, misuse of police for partisan purposes and political patronage quite often extended to corrupt police personnel'.

Having made this broad but not unsubstantiated generalization, the Court went on to suggest that the procedure for appointing senior officers be changed, such that a state's Director-General of Police be appointed by the Union Public Service Commission rather than the Chief Minister, and have a fixed tenure of two years. It also asked for the establishment, in each state, of an independent Police Establishment Board, to monitor postings and promotions at the lower levels of the force. Another recommendation was for the constitution of a State Security Commission, which would check and monitor political interference, and periodically evaluate the performance of the police.

When first offered, these recommendations of the Supreme Court were ignored. Now, in the wake of the horrible events in Mumbai, they need to be brought back into public debate. Admittedly, democracies will always be more vulnerable to terror as compared to more tightly controlled authoritarian states. However, one reason India in particular has been so prone to terror attacks are the manifest inefficiencies of our police and intelligence forces. The reasons for this lie, as I have underlined, not in the genetic or cultural make-up of the ordinary Indian but in the political manipulation of the Indian police.

This manipulation has continued for decades now. All political parties have practiced it. No state or city is immune from it. And yet there remain some outstanding police officers who, down the years, have placed their Constitutional obligations and duties above their personal interest or those of their political masters. Among the names that come to mind in this connection are Julio Ribeiro and the late Hemant Karkare. As of now, these remain exceptions. The task before us is to make them the rule. For this to happen, we need to insulate the police from political

interference, and simultaneously set in motion other, long overdue reforms—such as technological modernization, more focused training and skill development, and better pay.

The rage and anger at the Mumbai attacks is understandable. But it is also increasingly in danger of being misdirected. Rather than calling (as some hotheads have done) for war against Pakistan, this anger would be more constructively channelized towards the renewal of our police forces, such that it may function effectively, impartially, and promptly in permitting, to the best of its abilities, the free movement of people, goods, and ideas that is the basis of the democratic way of life.

### **THE TRIPLE TRAGEDY OF THE INDIAN MUSLIMS**

An influential editor from Delhi, visiting Bangalore, hosted a dinner for some local politicians, and invited me along. Among the netas present was the Karnataka Youth Congress president, the spokesman for H. D. Deve Gowda's Janata Dal (Secular), and an office-bearer of the Bharatiya Janata Party. The conversation turned to the history of communal violence in Karnataka. Someone mentioned that whereas the southern parts of the state had been mostly riot-free, towns on the coast had witnessed periodic bouts of Hindu-Muslim violence. Asked to explain this—since the coast is where his party has always been strong—the BJP man said that in those towns the Muslims were the 'dominant community', and it was when non-Muslims sought to challenge their hegemony that trouble broke out

I asked the politician to explain what, precisely, this 'dominance' consisted of. How many District Collectors and Superintendents of Police in coastal Karnataka were Muslim? And how many Judges, Professors, or Vice Chancellors? We knew of the achievements in the field of business of the Pairs of Manipal—were there any Muslim entrepreneurs of comparable wealth and influence?

A few days after this exchange, I was driving through Kamaraj Road, in the heart of the city. To get to my home I had to turn left onto Mahatma Gandhi Road, which is the busiest, most prestigious, road in Bangalore, somewhat like Chowringhee in Kolkata. Just ahead of me was a Muslim gentleman, who was attempting to do likewise. Except that he was making the turn not behind the wheel of a powerful Korean car but with a hand-cart on which were piled some bananas.

That the fruit-seller was Muslim was made clear by his headgear, a white cap with perforations. He was an elderly man, about sixty, short and slightly-built. The turn from Kamaraj Road into M. G. Road was made hard by his age and infirmity; and harder by the fact that the road slopes steeply downwards at this point, and by the further fact that making the turn with him were a thousand screaming motor vehicles. Had he gone too slow he would have been bunched in against the cars: had he gone too fast he might have lost control of his cart altogether, with the

bananas intended for his paying customers instead consumed, gratis, by the wheels of cars Japanese and German as well as Korean.

I was, as I said, right behind this Muslim fruit-seller, close enough to see him hunch his shoulders as he manoeuvred his cart leftwards, close enough to see those shoulders visibly relax as the turn was successfully made, with cart and bananas both intact.

One should not read too much into a single encounter, a single image, but it does seem to be that that perilous turn into M. G. Road was symptomatic of an entire life—a life lived close to the margins, at the edge of survival and subsistence, a life taken one day at a time and from one turn to the next. If anything, the life must have got harder over time. Back in the 1980s, there would have been more Bangaloreans who ate bananas off a cart. (Too many of these, nowadays, would rather drink Coke from a can or eat chips from a packet.) Back in the 1980s, the fruit-seller would have been twenty years younger, more in control of his cart, and having to contend with far less traffic too.

The life of that solitary fruit-seller is very representative of the life of Indian Muslims in general. Far from being ‘dominant’ or hegemonic, most Muslims are poor farmers, labourers, artisans, and traders. They are massively under-represented in the professions—few, too few, of India’s top lawyers, judges, doctors, and professors are Muslim. The proportion of Muslim parliamentarians and of Muslim civil servants has been steadily declining over time.

One reason there is no substantial Muslim middle class is the creation of those two new nations in August 1947. Back in the 1930s and 1940s, the thinking elite of cities such as Bombay, Lucknow, Delhi and Kolkata counted many Muslims in their ranks. In time, however, these liberal and cosmopolitan Muslims came to support Jinnah’s Pakistan movement. These bureaucrats, lawyers, teachers, and entrepreneurs hoped that in a Muslim state they would be free of competition from the more populous Hindus.

The migration of a large chunk of the Muslim middle class to Pakistan did not work out well for them. Migrating to escape the Hindu, they found themselves encircled and subordinated by the Punjabis. But their flight was also a disaster for India. For the Muslims left behind in this country have since lacked an enlightened and educated leadership.

If the first tragedy of the Indian Muslim was Partition, the second has been the patronage by India’s most influential political party of Muslims who are religious and reactionary rather than liberal and secular. This was not always so. Jawaharlal Nehru had placed much faith in two outstanding, and progressive-minded, Muslim politicians, Sheikh Abdullah and Said-ud-din Tyabji. However the Sheikh fell prey to his own ambition, seeking to become the King of an independent Kashmir rather than the democratic leader of all of India’s Muslims. And Tyabji died young.

While Nehru at least sought to cultivate the modern Muslim, the Congress of Indira, Rajiv, and Sonia Gandhi has consistently favoured the conservative sections of the community. When one of his M.P's, Arif Mohammed Khan, was willing to bat in public for the reform of Muslim personal laws, Rajiv dumped him in favour of the mullahs. The trend has continued, with the current Congress leadership likewise choosing to offer subsidies and sops to Muslim religious institutions rather than encourage them to engage with the modern world.

The third tragedy of the Indian Muslim is that India's other professedly national party has never really treated them as full-fledged citizens of the land. For the members and fellow travellers of the BJP, the Parsi is to be tolerated, the Christian distrusted, and the Muslim detested. One form this detestation takes is verbal—the circulation of innuendos, gossip and abuse based on lies and half-truths (as in the case of the Karnataka BJP man and the Muslims of the coast). Another form is physical—thus, the hand of the RSS and the VHP lies behind some of the worst communal riots in independent India, for example Bhagalpur in 1989, Bombay in 1992, and Gujarat in 2002, when, in all cases, an overwhelming majority of the victims were Muslims.

Prima facie, the justice system appears to be biased against the Muslims. The number of Muslim judges and senior police officers is miniscule. Again, while acts of violence by Muslims are quickly followed by the arrest and trial of the perpetrators (real or alleged), Hindus who provoke communal riots are treated with far greater indulgence by the law. This discrimination is violative of the rights of equal citizenship, and altogether unworthy of a country calling itself a democracy.

It is fashionable in some quarters to blame the Indian Muslims for their predicament. In my view, while the absence of a credible liberal leadership has contributed, a far greater role in their marginalization has been played by the malevolent policies of our major political parties. The Congress seeks to exploit the Muslims, politically. The BJP chooses to demonize, them, ideologically (but also with a political purpose in mind). The Congress wishes to take care of the (sometimes spurious) religious and cultural needs of the Muslims, rather than advance their real, tangible, economic and material interests. The BJP denies that they have any needs or interests at all.

## **TRIBAL TRAGEDIES**

Fifty years ago, in October 1958, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote a short note explaining what the state's policies towards the tribals of India should be. He urged that tribal rights in land and forest be protected, that tribal arts and culture be respected and renewed, that the tribals themselves be involved in their own administration (thus 'we should avoid introducing too many outsiders into tribal territory'), and that government schemes in tribal areas 'work through, and not in rivalry to, their own social and cultural institutions'. As Nehru pointed out, 'people should develop along the lines of their own genius and we should avoid imposing anything on them'.

Nehru's prescriptions have been comprehensively disregarded by the Government of India, as well as by the governments of the different states which have significant tribal populations. The quality of schools and hospitals in tribal areas is abysmal. There has been little attempt to involve tribals in their own administration. Worse, state policies have worked actively to dispossess tribals of their land and homes, and to deny them their traditional rights in the forest.

As recent studies have shown, the tribals of central India have gained least and lost most from six decades of Indian independence. Their access to education and health care is even more erratic than that of the Dalits. Unlike the Dalits, they usually go unrepresented in the higher levels of the bureaucracy, the judiciary, or the Union Cabinet.

Where the political system has ignored them, the economic system has discriminated against them. Tribal lands are submerged to provide water to Hindu farmers and electricity to urban residents. Else they are taken over by mining companies seeking to service the growing global market for minerals such as iron ore and bauxite. At other times, they are the victims of development's equally modern Other, conservation: thus a disproportionately high number of those displaced by national parks and sanctuaries are tribals.

The Indian state has treated its tribal citizens with contempt and condescension; so, too, have the major political parties of independent India. This neglect has opened up a space for other actors to move into. Thus, in recent decades, three different kinds of missionaries have sought to increase their influence in tribal areas. These are the Christian missionaries, the Hindu missionaries, and the Maoist missionaries.

These three groups each see in the tribals a vehicle for their own advancement. Admittedly, each group does try to bring some tangible benefits to the tribals. From the late 19th century, the Christian missionaries have run schools and hospitals in tribal areas. Since the 1950s, Hindu missionaries have emulated them, by opening their own set of patshalas and clinics. The Maoists, for their part, do often attempt to get the tribals a higher wage for labouring in a landlord's field, and higher rates for the collection of forest produce.

These welfare-oriented activities, however, are merely a means. The end, in each case, is to convert the tribal to the religious or political philosophy of the group in question. The padre or nun hopes to make the tribal a Christian; the sant or sadhu hopes to make the tribal a Hindu; the comrade or party secretary hopes to make him a Maoist. Thus, if the state and the established political parties have tended to treat the tribals as second-class citizens, Christian, Hindu, and Maoist missionaries have tended to treat them as cannon fodder.

Conventionally, the term 'missionaries' is reserved for the Christians. However, in tribal areas the VHP and the Maoists must be considered missionaries, too, in that they seek, by blandishments or by force, to convert the tribals to their own, alien, worldview. These three groups work energetically to augment their own flock at the expense of the others. Notably, each

group has a contempt for the history, the culture, the ideas, and the aspirations of the tribals themselves. Each works not through but in rivalry to tribal cultural institutions.

Hindu and Christian schools alike teach tribals to forget their own Gods and embrace the Gods promoted by them. Maoist meetings urge the tribals to replace their deities with the revolutionary trinity of Marx, Lenin, and Mao. At the same time, sadhu, sant, priest, nun, comrade and revolutionary have all shown little interest in the beauties of tribal art, folklore, music, and craftsmanship.

Tribal India has increasingly become a theatre for the competitive harvest of souls. In this rivalry the Christians are placed at a severe disadvantage. This is because the Maoists have behind them the power of the gun, whereas the Hindutva groups can command the power of the state apparatus. Wherever the BJP is in government, whether by itself or in a coalition, it makes sure that it controls the Education and Home portfolios, the better to reshape the curriculum of government schools and to direct the actions (or, as the case may be, the inaction) of the police.

It is hard to see how, within the present configuration, the adivasi will ever be treated with the dignity and respect that Nehru called for. Short-sighted state governments will continue to dispossess tribals to humour urban populations or mining companies. Arrogant missionaries will continue to demand that tribals abandon their own culture to embrace that of the outsider.

### **THE IMPURITY OF CULTURES**

In the 1950s, inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru, some very brilliant young Indians went into the Foreign Service. Among them was the Rhodes scholar Peter Lynn Sinai. A former Ambassador to Austria and Iraq, Mr Sinai has now chosen to make his home in Bangalore. At a dinner recently, I got talking to him, to discover that to the brilliance of mind so characteristic of the diplomats of his generation, Mr Sinai had in addition a sparkling wit, as these two stories he told me shall demonstrate.

The first anecdote related to the college we had both studied in. Peter Sinai took his first degree in Bombay, but then his father, a native of Goa, instructed him to move to Delhi for further studies. The object was to make him learn Hindi, to better equip himself for a career in the newly independent (and presumably hyper-nationalist) India. By sending him to Delhi's premier college, the father planned to make his son a proper desi. However, on his first day at St. Stephen's, the young Sinai discovered that the conversation at the dining table was conducted in (as he put it) a 'very haw-haw English'. The programme to indigenize the boy had in fact inadvertently prepared him for a lifelong engagement with the essential impurity of cultures.

Mr Sinai and I got talking of Y. D. Gundevia, whose book *Outside the Archives* I much admired. One of his first postings was as Second Secretary in Colombo, when Gundevia was India's High



Commissioner. The country was then known as Ceylon, and its President, S. W. R. D. Bandarnaike, was working hard to rid it of any lingering colonial influences. He had just imposed a language policy which made it mandatory for all citizens of the country to write their examinations in Sinhala. But Bandarnaike was not content with this; apart from the citizens of Ceylon, he wanted residents of other nationalities to learn the national language, too.

As Mr Sinai told the story, at a reception for the diplomatic corps the President of Ceylon got talking of the greatness of the Sinhala language. This was his first such address to that particular audience, but his two-hundred-and-fortieth speech all told on that particular subject. After he ended his talk, Mr Bandarnaike turned to the senior-most diplomat at the table. 'Mr Gundevia', he thundered, 'you have been in our country for more than a year now. Have you made any attempt to learn our beautiful and ancient language?'. 'As a matter of fact, I have, Sir', the Indian answered, 'and I do now know some words of Sinhala'. 'And what might these be?', asked the President. 'Solomon, West, Ridgeway, Dias', replied Gundevia, these being the four personal names of a man whose Sinhala chauvinism could not hide the fact that his family had once been associated with the Church and with Christian missionaries.

To this wonderful and revealing tale told me by a former diplomat let me append statements by two great modern writers. In 1907, James Joyce gave a lecture in Trieste, titled 'Ireland: Island of Saints and Sages'. Dismissing the idea that Ireland belonged only to Irish Catholics, Joyce remarked: 'Our civilization is an immense woven fabric in which very different elements are mixed... In such a fabric it is pointless searching for a thread that has remained pure, virgin and uninfluenced by other threads nearby.' Some sixty years later, the Kannada polymath Kota Shivarama Karanth wrote that it was impossible to 'to talk of 'Indian culture' as if it is a monolithic object'. Karanth had heard scholars and demagogues speak of something called 'Aryan culture'. Did they realize, he asked, 'what transformations this "Aryan culture" has undergone after reaching India?'.

In Karanth's opinion, 'Indian culture today is so varied as to be called "cultures". The roots of this culture go back to ancient times: and it has developed through contact with many races and peoples. Hence, among its many ingredients, it is impossible to say surely what is native and what is alien, what is borrowed out of love and what has been imposed by force. If we view Indian culture thus, we realise that there is no place for chauvinism.'

The search for a pure, uncontaminated culture—be this 'Sinhala' or 'Aryan' or 'Arabic' or 'Western'—runs against the grain of empirical evidence, the evidence of borrowings and reshaping of cultures that has been so ubiquitous in human history. But if it was only a question of historical truth perhaps one would not have to worry very much. The difficulty, or tragedy, is that the quest for cultural purity has had the most malign political consequences. Thus the Nazis have claimed that this practice or that was 'unGermanic'; the mullahs that this or that was 'unIslamic', the Sangh Parivar that this or that was 'unIndian'. Chauvinists have then acted on

such claims by villifying individuals and groups deemed insufficiently loyal to a certain national, religious, or ethnic creed.

The chauvinist turns on the cosmopolitan, and ultimately even on his own ilk. For who is to say what, finally, constitutes 100% proof of loyalty to a particular form of bigotry? In the light of the story told me by Peter Sinai, let us recall that S. W. R. D. Bandarnaike was murdered by a fellow Sinhala for not being enough of a chauvinist for the chauvinist's own tastes.

## **THE NORTH-EAST AND THE NATION**

Earlier this year I spent ten days travelling through three states of north-eastern India. My journey began in Manipur, where, on my first night, I had dinner with a bunch of academics and journalists. The humour on display was black: it was aimed chiefly at the two agencies that between them control and dominate the Imphal Valley: the Army and the insurgency. Speaking of the utter incompetence of the local administration, one Manipuri joked that 'the state has withered away, even before the revolution'.

Another told the story of the recent upgradation of Manipur University to the status of a Central University. Money was coming in by the barrel, to be distributed by less-than-orthodox means. The campus of the university, on the outskirts of Imphal city, needed a permanent wall to be built around it. According to the version passed around at that dinner table, the contract for the wall had been divided into four parts, each allotted to a front man for a different insurgent group.

My journey ended in Assam, where I was to speak at another new centre of higher education funded by the Central Government, the Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati. The IIT campus is sited on hilly terrain where the ministers of the Ahom kings had once lived. After that regime faded away, their homes had crumbled into the jungle. Now, however, the land had been freshly colonized by modern structures of glass and concrete, some housing computers of varying shapes and sizes, others the men and boys assigned to play with them. The buildings were impressive—none more so than the guest-house, where I stayed, which is built around a lake.

I was not told how much of the money spent on the new IIT campus reached the pockets of the very many insurgents and ex-insurgents who stalk the districts of Assam. But after my lecture I did hear a very characteristic complaint. I had spoken on the history of contemporary India, and inevitably the name of India's first Prime Minister figured in my lecture. During question time, an Assamese academic recalled, with palpable pain, the speech made by Jawaharlal Nehru on All India Radio during the India-China war of 1962. After the Chinese had overrun the Indian forces on the border, they came sweeping down the Brahmaputra Valley. The plains of Assam

beckoned, when the Chinese returned just as suddenly as they had come. Sometime during their forward march, Nehru had come on air to say that his heart went out to the people of Assam.

I have not actually seen a printed version of this talk. It has not been reproduced in the various volumes of Nehru's speeches. A tape might exist somewhere in the archives of All India Radio, that can prove or disprove the version that has long been current, a version I have heard several times over the years. In these iterations that phrase of Nehru's comes up again and again: 'My heart goes out to the people of Assam'.

The sentiment was (and is) amenable to more than one reading. Those sympathetic to Nehru might see it as an expression of concern, behind which lay affection and even love. His heart went out to the Assamese because with the flight of the Indian Army they were at the mercy of an unknown and most likely unforgiving enemy. But my questioner interpreted the remarks very differently. For her it reflected unconcern and even betrayal. By saying what he did, Nehru had given up on the Assamese. Instead of expressing a proper resolve to beat back the intruders, he had turned his back on his own people, delivering them up to the foreigner.

I answered the questioner by pointing to the possibility that what she and her fellow Assamese intellectuals saw as betrayal was actually an expression of concern. Then I added: 'In any case, it is forty-five years since Nehru made those remarks. Even if his words were carelessly chosen, must we still be stuck with them?'

To be sure, the Assamese are not the only Indians to think—or to have thought—that those who live in New Delhi condescend to them. The political programmes of those very successful regional parties, the Akali Dal and the DMK, are founded on the belief that the Sikhs and the Tamils have been treated as second-class citizens by the Government of India. The sense of being discriminated against, as the readers of this newspaper know, is also powerfully felt by the Bengalis.

Assam is further away from New Delhi than even Kolkata or Chennai. And Manipur and Nagaland are further away still. It is, indeed, in the north-east of India that these feelings of exclusion and discrimination are most keenly felt. Assam participated large-heartedly in the freedom struggle; and got very little in return. Manipur was annexed under somewhat dubious circumstances. Nagaland and Mizoram were historically never part of the broader Indic civilization—separated from it historically, geographically, and culturally, they found, to their mystification, that when the British left they were designated part of this new nation, India.

No state in the north-east has been altogether free of insurgency. All have witnessed armed struggles, of varying degrees of intensity, seeking independence from India. Viewed comparatively, the Indian experience is of a piece with the other new nations of Asia. China has had much trouble with its borderlands, with Tibetan Buddhists and Uighur Muslims who resent the political and cultural domination of the Han. The Burmese Army has been occupied for

decades in trying to suppress rebellions in the Karen and Shan uplands. The Pakistani Army has effectively ceded control of Waziristan to tribal marauders.

The building of nations has historically been filled with pain and the shedding of blood. Move backwards from contemporary Asia into early modern Europe, and consider the troubles the British had with the Scots, the French had with the hill people of the Pyrenees, the Spaniards had and are indeed still having with the Basques. But unlike the France or Britain of the past, and unlike the China and Burma of the present, India is a democracy. It cannot therefore simply suppress voices of dissent and protest. It must seek to engage with them.

The Indian Government has a responsibility to understand and respect the people who live on its peripheries; so do the citizens who live in states more keen to count themselves as part of India. When they travel to places like Delhi and Bangalore, the residents of the north-eastern states find that they are met with indifference and incomprehension. Punjabis and Kannadigas alike joke heartlessly about their allegedly un-Indian looks, about their unfamiliar dress and diet, and more. The insurgencies in states such as Assam, Manipur and Nagaland were aimed, in the first instance, at the Central Government. But they were fuelled also by the sense that the people of India had chosen to ignore or condescend to them. Those insurgencies have since degenerated into extortion rackets. Knowing this, the Nagas are by no means uncritical supporters of the NSCN (I-M), nor the Assamese of ULFA. But their anger at the Indian State remains. So, too, their disappointment and dismay at the lack of fellow feeling among the residents of the Indian heartland.

### **HOW NOT TO FIGHT EXTREMISM**

In the spring of 1990, a great Indian patriot, the liberal jurist V. M. Tarkunde, led a team of independent citizens on a study tour of the Kashmir Valley. Many cases of police and army excesses were reported to them: beatings (sometimes of children), torture (of men innocent of any crime), extra-judicial (or ‘encounter’) killings, and the violation of women. ‘It is not possible to list all the cases which were brought to our notice’, commented Tarkunde’s team:

‘But the broad pattern is clear. The militants stage stray incidents and the security forces retaliate. In this process large numbers of innocent people get manhandled, beaten up, molested and killed. In some cases the victims were caught in [the] cross-fire and in many more cases they were totally uninvolved and there was no crossfiring. This tends to alienate people further.’

Tarkunde’s report was published in the early stages of a civil conflict that has now claimed at least 50,000 lives. Reading it today, one is struck by the parallels between the situation in Kashmir, c. 1990, and the situation in Chattisgarh, c. 2007-8. In both places, an insurgent movement has provoked an excessive response by the Indian State, which has led to the loss of very many innocent lives, the intimidation and arrest of bystanders and intellectuals, the

suppression of human rights, and, through all this, to an undermining of India's claim to be the world's largest democracy.

The insurgency in Kashmir asked for an independent homeland for the Valley—it was, depending on your vantage point, either 'nationalist' or 'secessionist'. The insurgency in Chattisgarh aims at the construction of a one-party Communist state in India—its supporters would see it as 'revolutionary', its opponents (among whom this writer is certainly one) as 'extremist' and 'anti-democratic'. However, both movements have drawn nourishment from a deep sense of discontent among the local population. Had New Delhi not routinely fixed elections and promoted corrupt regimes in Kashmir, the insurgency would have been still-born. Had Central and State Governments not treated adivasis as worse than sub-human, by denying them access to education and health care while at the same time taking away their lands and forests for the benefit of the urban-industrial economy, the Naxalite movement would never have got off the ground.

The Kashmiris have been denied autonomy and dignity; the adivasis of interior Chattisgarh victimized and brutalized. Without this sorry history of abuse, we would not have had a jihad in the one place, or a Naxalite insurgency in the other. That said, no democrat can defend the methods used by either movement. The Indian Constitution, and the heritage of the Indian freedom struggle, demands that class or ethnic or linguistic disputes be settled through non-violent means. It does not encourage the use of arms to settle civil conflicts; and nor should we.

The modern histories of Kashmir and Chattisgarh have followed a similar trajectory. First, neglect and exploitation; then, violent rebellion and protest; finally, a freeranging use of state power in suppressing this rebellion and protest. The Kashmir story is well known; so let me focus now on the situation in Chattisgarh. Here, in one district alone, Dantewara, there are close to ten thousand armed men paid by the state to maintain law and order. These owe their institutional allegiance variously to the State Police, the Central Reserve Police Force, and other paramilitary bodies such as the Naga Battalions.

Two summers ago, I went with some colleagues to study the conflict in Dantewara. We found an atmosphere of fear and terror pervading the district. Some of the fear was engendered by the Naxalites; some, by the police and paramilitary. But by far the worst culprit was a vigilante group promoted, funded, and supported by the State Government, that went by the name of the Salwa Judum. This consisted of bands of young men, armed with rifles and given carte blanche by the authorities to roam around the countryside. This they did, to brutal effect. Homes were looted and burnt, animals stolen or slaughtered, and women abused. Often, the Salwa Judum were accompanied and aided by the paramilitary.

I continue to get reports from Dantewara, and these continue to make painful reading. (An SMS I received this morning carries the information that a woman and baby girl have been murdered by the CRPF.) With the Supreme Court are many petitions signed by villagers who have been at the

receiving end of state-sponsored terror. The residents of Korcholi village write: ‘The frightened villagers of Gangaloor, Cherpai and Bijapur, seeing the Salwa Judum, have fled into [the] forests. The Salwa Judum burns the food stock, houses and clothes. They also break the cooking utensils. Raping women, slitting people’s throat to kill, killing people by drowning them in water, robbing them etc. are the main activities of the Salwa Judum leaders. Why is this happening in our country, why is this happening in Chattisgarh? Why has the Chattisgarh administration been running this? Has our Chief Minister been elected only for this?’

In some ways the behaviour of the Indian State has been far worse in Chattisgarh than in Kashmir. For one thing, there is no provocation here from a foreign country. This, and the distance from Delhi, may also be why the Central Government and the national media have tended to ignore or underplay the horrible crimes being committed in Chattisgarh in the name of fighting extremism.

I come, finally, to the last parallel between the two places—the intimidation and silencing of independent voices. The Director-General of Police in Chattisgarh has recently called me a ‘psychological dupe’ of the Naxalites. This will certainly be news to the Naxalites! I detest them and their methods, but I deplore, too, the outsourcing of law and order to a bunch of untrained goons, and the anarchy and disorder that has resulted. The methods used by the Chattisgarh Government, and especially of the Salwa Judum movement they have promoted and funded, are as antithetical to the Indian Constitution as are the methods of the Naxalites.

However, had I lived in Bhilai and not in Bangalore, I might have not have been free to say as much. For it is in the former town that the Chattisgarh Government has recently arrested the independent film-maker Ajay T. G.. I know Ajay, and can attest, as a mutual friend puts it, that ‘for all forms of violence he has a deep and abiding distaste’.

If Ajay T. G. is a Naxalite, then Justice V. M. Tarkunde was a member of Al Qaeda. He is, however, a sensitive and compassionate soul, who runs a school for children from poor families, and has made moving films on social issues. Ajay is also an office-bearer of the state unit of the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties, which is very likely why the Chattisgarh Government has put him in jail. For the PUCL has, rightly and bravely, been critical of the regime of terror and intimidation unleashed by the State administration in Dantewara.

The victimization of Ajay T. G. brings to mind the not dissimilar treatment, back in 2002-3, of the Kashmiri journalist Iftikhar Gilani. Jailed on false charges, after a brave and dogged fight to clear his name he was finally released. A journalist who followed that case closely writes that ‘Iftikhar is a gentle, modest man who has put up with great pain and humiliation and come through a terrible ordeal with his dignity and honour intact.’ I hope that we can, one day soon, come to say the same about Ajay T. G..

The treatment of innocent bystanders in Kashmir over a fifteen year period remains a dark blot on Indian democracy. Now, the vengeful attitude of the authorities in Chattisgarh threatens to make that blot even darker.

## **WATCHING THE WATCHDOG**

The formal institutions of Indian democracy are not especially marked by the capacity for self-correction and self-criticism. One fact should make this clear—that no senior politician, civil servant, or judge has ever been successfully convicted for corruption or abuse of power. What then of that great informal institution of Indian democracy, the press? Is there a mechanism by which we can understand, and correct, the errors, biases, and malpractices of newspapers and television channels?

This question is prompted by a discussion currently taking place on the website of the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA). It was initiated by James Mutti, an American Fulbright scholar who had spent time studying the functioning of the press in northern India. Mutti found that ‘there is an inherent tension between India’s much-hyped economic growth and its deepening democracy’. The media was partly to blame for this. For it ‘abdicates its role as an educator in favor of being an entertainer’. Those who consume the news were a willing accomplice in this abdication. For ‘more people want to find out about the new iPod than Indian foreign policy’. And ‘those who read papers and watch TV are often more interested in Bollywood stars than rural poverty’.

Mutti arrived at this less-than-cheering conclusion: ‘In India today, the media is big business—relying on corporate advertising and the spending of the middle class—and it is hard to claim that it is a public good that reaches most citizens’.

The website published a range of responses to Mutti’s article. One correspondent, while endorsing the visitor’s verdict, thought the state of the Indian media was a product merely of ‘immaturity’. ‘We haven’t had the media around for very long’, he wrote: ‘Certainly not half as long as the Americans have.’ ‘The US media is extremely conscious of its role as primary sources of information to the rulers and the ruled alike’, wrote another contributor to the debate: ‘They know they trade in information. In the business plan of the Indian media, news is only the space that needs to be filled, so that advertisements can be carried’.

One commentator, the respected media analyst Sevanti Ninan, thought that the data on the ground did not justify the article’s ‘sweeping conclusion’. Mr Mutti, she suggested, had based himself largely on a reading of the English press. On the other hand, the regional press often did cover issues of interest to the less-than-affluent classes. In newspapers published in state capitals and district towns, she wrote, ‘the state of roads, schools and hospitals in rural and urban India

get far more attention now than ever before because they are many more pages to fill at the local level. When accountability increases even the poor benefit’.

However, in so far as the English language press is concerned, Mr Mutti’s criticisms may in fact have understated the problem. He speaks of the focus on glamour and celebrity and the neglect of the lives of ordinary Indians. This, he suggests, was a consequence of the press’s wooing of the consuming classes, who are a large (and massively revenue-generating) world unto themselves. It may be that because he is an American he mentioned Bollywood rather than cricket. But, as the manic coverage of the IPL has demonstrated, this game has contributed even more to the dumbing down of the media.

As it happens, the contagion runs far deeper than trivialization. Consider, for instance, the unwholesome practice of private ‘treaties’ whereby, in exchange for passing on stock to press owners, companies can get favourable coverage in the news pages. Consider, again, the laying off by several newspapers of environmental and labour correspondents in recent years—an action never formally explained or commented upon, but which may be reasonably surmised as being linked to the bad publicity for potential advertisers that such reporters tend to bring.

At other times the seductions are not commercial but political. Some proprietors, and more than some writers, are so closely allied to individual politicians or parties as to be less than objective about them. This phenomenon is particularly common among editors and columnists based in New Delhi. But it is not unknown in the state capitals, and even in district towns. For the local papers depend as heavily on advertisements supplied by the government (for tenders, and such like), as their metropolitan counterparts do on patronage by the private sector. It can become hard, and even impossible, for small-town editors or journalists to openly challenge the misconduct of a District Magistrate or an MLA.

Finally, there has been a decline in the quality and depth of reportage. The press appears to have become lazier in the past few decades. Once, even senior editors would make extended field trips to research a story, travelling in the interior and speaking to a cross-section of the public. Now, if they leave New Delhi, it is usually to accompany the Prime Minister to Beijing or Washington. But even some younger reporters have become prey to ‘hand out journalism’, to stringing together stories on the basis of press releases, supplemented by the odd quote.

To be sure, there are dissenters. But these often write in a sanctimonious and self-righteous tone, setting themselves up as the lonely voice of conscience amidst a horde of unthinking cheerleaders for globalization and liberalization. They are also noticeably partisan, focusing on poverty and suffering in states (or nations) ruled by parties other than the Communists.

There remain some honest editors and many good reporters. But I think it fair to say that within the English press in India there is much room for improvement. Let me offer an illustration of the kind of story we should but do not often see. For the last year and more, Sharad Pawar has simultaneously served both as the Union Minister of Agriculture and the President of the Board



of Control for Cricket in India. That is to say, Mr Pawar is in charge of the destiny of India's most numerous social class as well of India's greatest popular passion. He has held these posts at a time of a serious agrarian crisis on the one hand, and a massive reshaping of the cricket world, on the other. How does he do these two jobs at the same time? What is his daily or weekly or monthly schedule of meetings and journeys? My own suspicion is that one sector under his watch must surely be suffering, and I think I can guess which one. But this (possibly widely shared) suspicion awaits testing against the hard evidence of reportage. However, the sectors are each so important that a man who presumes to take charge of both surely needs to be subjected to far greater scrutiny than he has thus far been.

Other readers will have their own list of unexplored themes. Thus one contributor to the SAJA debate writes that while 'everyone knows about the fraud committed by [the] godmen of India', 'no main line papers would like to take up this kind of subject'. (Both Mr Pawar's daily schedule and the doings of godmen, by the way, are subjects amenable to investigation through print as well as television.)

We hear, rightly and often, of the need to make the legislature and the executive more accountable. The press is expected to play a vanguard role in making this happen. But who will watch the watchdog? This is a question that is asked less frequently. However, if we are lucky, the rise of the Internet will perhaps compel the press to look within, thus to check against the corruptions and complacencies to which it, like any other human institution, is prone.

### **THE RISE AND FALL OF INDIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM,**

Thirty-five years ago this week, a group of peasants in the upper Alakananda Valley stopped a group of loggers from felling a patch of forest. That act of protest gave birth to the Chipko Andolan and, by extension, to the Indian environmental movement. Through the 1970s, other peasants in the Himalaya successfully prevented other loggers from decimating public forests. Then, under the leadership of the visionary Chandi Prasad Bhatt, they turned from protest to reconstruction, reforesting barren hillsides and promoting renewable sources of energy such as biogas plants and microhydel projects.

Unlike in the West, where modern environmentalism was given birth to by scientists, in India it began through the protests of rural communities. Following Chipko, tribals in the Chotanagpur Plateau launched their own struggles in defence of local rights in the forest. Meanwhile, on the Kerala coast, artisanal fisherfolk protested the destruction of their fish stocks by large trawlers. And in Gandhamardan in Orissa, tribals resisted the damage to their lifestyles and to the local ecology by bauxite mining.

Since its origins, the environmental movement in India has passed through four stages. In the 1970s, it was seen as something of an interloper, disturbing the consensus—shared among

politicians and intellectuals alike—that concern for nature was a luxury only rich countries could afford. The Marxist intellectuals went further; for them, ecology was a ‘bourgeois deviation from the class struggle’. Dismissed at first as CIA agents, men like Chandi Prasad Bhatt slowly brought their critics around to the view that there was indeed an ‘environmentalism of the poor’. Where in the West the green movement was motivated by the desire to keep beautiful places unpolluted to walk through, in India environmentalism was driven not by leisure but by survival. There was an unequal competition over resources such as forests, fish, water, and pasture. On one side were local communities who depended on these resources for subsistence; on the other, urban and industrial interests who appropriated them for profit. State policies had tended to favour the latter, leading to protests that called for a fairer and more sustainable use of the gifts of nature.

If in the 1970s they struggled to be heard, in the 1980s Indian greens began receiving massive (and mostly positive) media attention. There was a veritable flood of reportage on environmental issues, and in most languages of the Eighth Schedule. Of those who wrote in English, the names of Anil Agarwal, Darryl D'Monte, and Usha Rai come to mind. But superb work was also done by Raj Kumar Keswani and Shekhar Pathak in Hindi, and by Nagesh Hegde in Kannada. With this surge of media attention came a welcome if belated response from the government. In 1980 a new Department of the Environment was established. This was upgraded five years later into a full-fledged Ministry of Environment and Forests. State Governments followed by setting up environment ministries of their own.

To begin with, peasants had protested; then, journalists sympathetically reported on these protests. Now commenced a third phase, which we may term ‘professionalization’. Scientists and social scientists began to systematically analyse the roots of environmental conflicts. Some went further, seeking technical or institutional solutions. The flagship Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore started a Centre for Ecological Sciences. This academic interest was manifest in the social sciences as well—thus, for the first time, students could take courses or write theses in the emerging fields of ‘ecological economics’ and ‘environmental history’.

Then, in about 1995, an anti-environmental backlash began. As the Indian economy began to take off, as a surge of new projects were floated or started, the greens found themselves cast as negative, backward looking, indeed, as the only obstacles to India's march to greatness. Where it had once stifled private enterprise, the state now bent over backwards to accommodate it. Only the greens were willing to ask any questions at all—about where the land for the new projects would come from, for example, or what likely impact the projects would have on the state of the air and the water.

From the mid 1990s, a series of sharp attacks on environmentalists began appearing in the national press. Where they were once calumnied as CIA agents, now they were said to be a hangover from the bad old days of socialism, of being, as it were, KGB agents in disguise. The criticisms were at times deeply unfair. But it must be admitted that the greens had not always

stated their case to advantage. They had used exaggerated, apocalyptic, language. They had demonized the market as they had once demonized the state. And some greens had displayed what appeared to be an almost atavistic fear of modern technology.

The attacks on environmentalists were initiated by a few free-market ideologues, whose arguments found a ready audience among the growing middle class. With India (for the first time) experiencing high rates of economic growth, the greens were dismissed as party-poopers. Bowing to the mood, the press stopped running stories on the degradation of the environment and the marginalization of the rural communities that it caused. A greater and more shameful abdication was by the Ministry of Environment and Forests, which dismantled the existing safeguards and made the clearance of even the most destructive projects a mere formality.

There are many good things to be said in favour of economic liberalization. It has increased productivity and efficiency, and spawned a new wave of philanthropy. At the same time, the consumer boom it has engendered has come at a very large cost. Air pollution levels in India's cities are among the highest in the world. Most of our rivers are dead, killed by industrial pollution or untreated sewage. Commercial farming has massively depleted groundwater aquifers. And, out of sight of the cities and the middle class, mining projects in central India are leading to a disaster of possibly epic (and certainly tragic) proportions. Politicians in states such as Orissa and Chattisgarh have handed over huge areas of forests and hillside to bauxite and iron ore companies. Although only a fraction of the projects cleared have begun operation, they are already destroying fields and farms, polluting rivers, and sending the tribals they dispossess into the waiting arms of the Naxalites.

It may be that the anti-environmental backlash has finally run its course. If not the facts on the ground, the growing global concern with climate change could bring the question of sustainable development back into centre-stage. If, or when, that happens, the Indian elite would be advised to look within, to seek solutions worked out at home and in keeping with Indian conditions. For there is far more to Indian environmentalism than dharnas and satyagrahas. In those decades of the 1980s and 1990s, Indian scientists had thought deeply of how best to generate growth and employment while keeping in mind the distinctive resource endowments and social structures of our land. I think, for example, of the work of the late A. K. N. Reddy on sustainable energy strategies, of Madhav Gadgil and Ashish Kothari on biodiversity conservation, of Anupam Mishra and Ramaswamy Iyer on water management, of Dinesh Mohan on transport, of Dunu Roy on workplace safety, and of Ravi Chopra and the Peoples Science Institute in Dehradun on rehabilitation.

The work of these scholars addresses the environmental question in highly practical ways. They show how we can more sustainably manage our water and forest resources, forge better transport and energy policies, and protect the health of our citizens. Their studies, still available, still relevant, can—if given the necessary push by the press and the broader public—take India down a less destructive, that is to say more sustainable, path of economic development.

(This column is based on my T. N. Khoshoo Memorial Lecture, delivered in New Delhi on 24th March 2008.)

## **TOWARDS A GENDER-SENSITIVE CIVIL CODE**

Article 44 of the Constitution of India reads: ‘The State shall endeavour to secure for the citizens a uniform civil code throughout the territory of India’.

The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the first Law Minister, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, were both modernists who wished to reform archaic personal laws and bring them in line with progressive notions of gender justice. They were both committed, in theory, to a Uniform Civil Code. However, faced with the bitter opposition of Muslim members in the Constituent Assembly, they decided to begin with the reform of the personal laws of the Hindus, a community whose liberal wing was both influential and articulate. All the same, it took them all of eight years to pass the laws that finally made caste irrelevant in marriage, allowed Hindu women the right to choose or divorce their marriage partners, abolished bigamy and polygamy among Hindus, and granted Hindu daughters and wives rights in the property of their fathers and husbands.

The opposition to the reform of the Hindu personal laws was led by the Jana Sangh (forerunner of today’s Bharatiya Janata Party) and the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh. The RSS held hundreds of meetings throughout India, where the proposals to outlaw bigamy and to give women property rights were denounced in the strongest language. The Hindu right claimed that, as one born in a low-caste home, Dr Ambedkar had no business or authority to interpret or override the Hindu shastras. The laws being drafted to allow personal choice in marriage and inheritance rights to daughters were denounced as ‘an Atom Bomb on Hindu society’.

On the other side, the socialists and Communists chastised the Government for not reforming the personal laws of all communities. In the Lok Sabha, a Communist member named B. C. Das called the new laws for Hindus ‘a mild, moderate attempt at social reform with all the hesitancy and timidity characteristic of all social measures sponsored by this Government’. The great socialist Parliamentarian J. B. Kripalani told the Government that ‘you must bring it [the new laws] also for the Muslim community. Take it from me that the Muslim community is prepared to have it but you are not brave [enough] to do it’.

Such were the alignments in the 1950s; how different are the alignments now! For the past two decades, the BJP and the RSS have insisted that since the Hindu laws were reformed, the Muslims should also follow suit. The demand gathered pace after the Shah Bano controversy, and has figured heavily in the oral rhetoric and printed publications of the BJP through the 1990s and beyond. On the other side, those professedly secular parties, the Congress and the Communists, are now bitterly opposed to the framing of a Uniform Civil Code.

The debates of the 1990s and beyond have thus placed the major political parties in exactly the opposite positions as they had found themselves in the 1950s. Then, the Jana Sangh and the RSS had opposed the granting of equal rights to Hindu women; now, they say that they stand for equal rights for Muslim women. Then, the Congress and the Left had supported and indeed had passed personal laws in favour of the majority of Indian women; now, they say they are not in favour of a further extension to Muslim women.

It is difficult to credit the BJP with being seriously committed to ensuring justice to Muslim women. In their six years in office, they did not make the slightest attempt to introduce legislation in Parliament that would, for example, have abolished polygamy, enhanced the rights of widows and divorced women, or mandated gender-neutral property and inheritance laws. This may well have been because to resolve the issue would have been to render it impotent as an electoral gambit. So long as the Muslims had their separate laws it was easy to portray the community itself as separate, and hence not worthy of trust.

As for the Congress, in opposing a common civil code it is deeply oblivious of its own history. The drafting and passing of a gender-sensitive civil code for all Indians would in fact only be a fulfilment of the Congress and Constitutional legacy. Sadly, the two women who have led the Congress party for long periods (Indira Gandhi and Sonia Gandhi) have not—at least in this respect—lifted an inch to enhance the rights of their fellow women citizens. Even more culpable in this regard was Rajiv Gandhi. The Supreme Court judgement in the Shah Bano case presented the Government of the day with a marvellous opportunity to push through progressive legislation on behalf of all Indian women. Rajiv Gandhi had 400 MP's at his command; what he did not have was an understanding or appreciation of his own grandfather's legacy.

The reform of family law has thus become deeply politicized, subject to the pressures of party politics rather than governed by the principles of gender justice or the ideals of the Indian Constitution. But, as Shabana Azmi has pointed out, 'for far too long women have been victimized and justice has been denied to them under the pretence of personal law'. This is true of formal Muslim law but also of customary Hindu law, as in the still powerful caste councils that ostracize women who dare marry outside their community. There is thus 'an urgent need to cull out the just and equitable laws of all religions and form a blueprint for a uniform civil code based on gender justice'.

Azmi's formulation allows us to alleviate the fear that any new, all-India law would be modelled on Hindu law alone. Jurists can and should work from first principles, in designing personal laws that do not discriminate by caste or gender or religion. To be modern, and Indian, we need surely to honour and uphold the essential principle of a modern democracy, which is also the guiding spirit of our Constitution, namely, 'equality before the law'.

The first woman Chief Justice, Leila Seth, has persuasively argued that a common civil code 'will help break down those customary practices harmful to women and give women individual

identity as independent citizens of India’. To the fear that such a code would imperil religious freedom, Justice Seth has this answer: ‘A uniform civil code will not take away the right to perform religious ceremonies and rituals; but would any woman object to a code that gives her equal property rights, protection from polygamy and arbitrary divorce, and the right to adopt and the right to inheritance even if her father or husband converts to another religion?’

These voices of independent feminists and liberal jurists have, however, been drowned out in the din of partisan politics. The BJP will speak of a Uniform Civil Code simply to spite the Muslims, but shall make no move to implement it, preferring to have the issue hang as a threatening Damocles Sword instead. The Congress and its allies will oppose a common civil code for reasons that are equally perverse; because the BJP claims to support it, and because they can then be seen as standing alongside the Muslim minority, or, rather, with the priestly orthodoxy which professes to speak in its name.

### **SELECTIVE RIGHTEOUSNESS**

A mail arrived in my Inbox last week, as part of a circular sent to many people with some connection to the press. Addressed to ‘the Chief Editor/ Photographer’, it read: ‘We request you to cover the demonstration that AIDWA is organizing against the violence perpetrated on a (sic) tribal women in Assam at 1.30 pm near Jantar Mantar.’ Signed by the General Secretary of the organization, it then went on to say that ‘AIDWA condemns the public stripping, beating and near-lynching of a tribal woman in broad daylight in Guwahati during clashes that erupted between members of tea-tribes demanding ST status and members of the public. We have demanded exemplary punishment of the perpetrators, and full support to the traumatized woman.’

My first thought on receiving this mail was a malicious one. Why had the All India Democratic Women’s Association not organized a demonstration to protest the externment from the state of West Bengal of the writer Taslima Nasreen, where it could have demanded ‘exemplary punishment of the perpetrators, and full support to the traumatized woman’?

The thought was malicious but not, I think, wholly unfair. For AIDWA is an organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), and like all bodies or individuals associated with that party, it has a highly selective attitude towards suffering and discrimination. It was surely moved by the brutal beating of a poor tribal woman in Guwahati (as any sensitive human being would be); but its sympathy and indignation were not entirely uninfluenced by the fact that the State Government in Assam is run by a party other than its own.

As editorials and essays in this newspaper have pointed out, the incidents at Nandigram have once more exposed the hypocrisy of the organized Left. Violence is bad, if committed by parties or cadres of the right or the centre. It is excusable and even legitimate if it is the handiwork of

cadres or leaders of the CPM and its allies. In some respects, however, the reaction to Taslima's predicament has been even more hypocritical. For in Nandigram there were, and are, two sides to the story. Over the past year or so, the activists of the Trinamul Congress and of the Bhoomi Uchched Protirodh Committee have not exactly shown an exemplary commitment to democratic procedure. Harrassment and intimidation, arson and beating, were elements in their armoury of violence, as they were in the armoury of the CPM cadres who 'recaptured' the territory. In that respect, and that alone, the Chief Minister of West Bengal was correct when he spoke of the protesters being 'paid back in their own coin'. That said, the CPM and the Left Front are far more culpable than the BUPC rebels—for, they represent an elected Government that has a greater responsibility to work within the law.

The case of the Bangladeshi novelist is more straightforward. Forced to flee her native land, she was living quietly in Kolkata. She had not used violence or even harsh words against anyone in the city. Then, a group of Muslim extremists held a rally protesting her presence; the rally turned violent, and the Army had to be called in to restore the peace. The Left Front Government immediately capitulated to the extremists' demands. The next day Taslima was put on a plane to Jaipur.

As it happens, I was in a meeting in Chennai when the decision was taken in Writers Building to, as it were, throw a writer out of the state. I had not watched television the whole day, and was thus alerted to the developments by a former teacher of mine in Kolkata. Although of north Indian extraction, she married a distinguished Bengali statistician and moved to his native city. She has lived there now for more than four decades. Despite her origins she is, for all intents and purposes, a member of the *bhadralok* intelligentsia. She speaks fluent Bangla, and endorses and indeed embodies the progressive, liberal, cosmopolitan views associated—or once associated?—with that particular social class.

Speaking over the phone, my teacher was clearly very deeply moved. That a city identified with art and culture and literature and ideas, a city she had thought was her city—that this city had now so callously treated a writer was bad enough. What was worse was where the State Government had sent Taslima. 'She is going to Rajasthan', my teacher informed me: 'So Rajasthan is considered progressive nowadays'.

The irony in her voice was palpable. For Kolkata was the home of the Bengali Renaissance, which—or so we were once told—brought to the Indian sub-continent progressive and humanist ideas that were to bear fruition, in time, in the democratic and egalitarian ideals of the Indian Constitution. On the other hand, Rajasthan was a notoriously backward backwater, a state steeped in feudalism, which—so it was said—had never produced a writer or scientist of note, and where women were particularly badly treated. As recently as the 1980s, Bengal was the land of Satyajit Ray, while Rajasthan was the land of Roop Kanwar. Now, two decades later, a writer felt safer there rather than here. What could be more ironical, more bizarre, more shameful?

I think the Taslima case has and will test the integrity of the Left intelligentsia even more than Nandigram. After the latest outrage in Nandigram, CPM-affiliated academics such as Prabhat and Utsa Patnaik, Irfan Habib, and the like issued a wishy-wishy statement that, in effect, excused and condoned the violence. This was followed by a statement signed by CPM sympathizers living abroad—Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali among them—which suggested that to criticize the party's doings in Nandigram was to play into the hands of the American imperialists.

On Taslima's expulsion, however, the fellow travellers both desi and foreign have thus far been silent. As intellectuals and writers themselves, they should not have such a selective approach to the issue of freedom of expression. They protest when the BJP or the Shiv Sena bans a book or intimidates an artist; should they not do the same when the CPM does likewise?

It was speculated—probably rightly—that the Left Front's decision to send Taslima away was prompted by the fear of losing the minority vote as a consequence of Nandigram (where the vast majority of the victims of the latest round of violence were Muslims). Will the opinion polls that show a vast majority of Kolkata residents wanting to have Taslima in their midst cause them to rethink? Or will Narendra Modi's cleverly brazen invitation to the writer to take refuge in Gujarat embarrass the CPM into rescinding the expulsion order? Or will these facts and provocations be disregarded, and the fundamentalists win after all?

As this column goes to press there are no clear answers to these questions. My own hope, naïve as it is, is for the Government of West Bengal to invite Taslima back to Kolkata, and then follow it up with a comparable invitation to M. F. Hussain (an artist who certainly would not be welcome in Narendra Modi's Gujarat). That would redeem not just the credibility and conscience of the Left, but the credibility and conscience of Bengal itself. Can a land which has long thought of itself as being in the cultural vanguard allow its history and heritage to be so brutally vandalized by a bunch of fundamentalists and bigots?

## **THE KLEPTOCRAT AND THE DEMOCRAT**

In September I was in the United States, travelling around the cities of the East Coast. The exiled Pakistani politician Benazir Bhutto had been there a few weeks previously, visiting the same cities and frequently speaking at the same venues (albeit to much larger and more interested audiences). Besides academics and policy makers, Ms Bhutto also met senior politicians and the mandarins of the State Department. I learnt that she had—to use a colloquialism that does not come naturally to me but seems apt for the situation at hand—‘wooded’ her hosts so effectively that she was now being presented as the last, and best, hope for democracy in Pakistan.



One reason Benazir made such an impression on the East Coast establishment was, of course, was that in matters of education she was one of them. She had studied at Radcliffe, the women's wing of Harvard University, and, before that, at Oxford. She spoke impeccable English and could, when called upon, quote the Founding Fathers—Jefferson, Madison, and so on.

The second reason the American elite took to Benazir was that they were desperate for better news from the Islamic world. Their attempts to build, or more accurately impose, democracy and the rule of law in Afghanistan and Iraq had come undone. Hamid Karzai was not much more than the Mayor of Kabul. The Iraqi Government did not even control most of Baghdad.

The news from Pakistan was not very good, either. The Americans had backed General Pervez Musharraf because he had agreed to help them in the war against terror. Besides, he had presented himself as a Pakistani Attaturk—as a modernizer who would promote economic growth and secularism in a society steeped in backwardness and superstition. But six years after 9/11, the General was seen to have reneged on both these promises. Al Qaeda and the Taliban were in effective command of Pakistan's tribal borderlands, from where they made frequent raids into Afghanistan. Two Pakistani provinces were run by Islamic parties.

The Americans did not want to abandon Musharraf, but hoped that for his sake and theirs he would agree to a deal with Benazir. If he shed his uniform and stayed on as President, and the lady stepped in as Prime Minister, could not this be represented as a transition to democracy, albeit a guided and gradual one?

In October Benazir came back to Pakistan, her return breathlessly covered by the Western media. The Sunday Times ran a two page story that was steeped in sycophancy. The correspondent spoke of how she had known Benazir for twenty years, in which time she had apparently never wavered from her democratic faith, while apparently also displaying a deep empathy with the poor and excluded. The corruption charges against her and her husband were mentioned, but dismissed as having never been proved. Other papers were as reverential, speaking likewise of her courage and her commitment. The only note of dissent was struck by the former wife of the Pakistani cricketer-turned-politician Imran Khan, who described Benazir as 'a kleptocrat in a Hermes scarf'.

The American Establishment is known for its gullibility, the British press for its superficiality. That they would both take so whole-heartedly to Benazir is not wholly unexpected. What was more surprising, and depressing, was a story carried by the BBC World Service in the third week of November, which compared Ms Bhutto with the Burmese dissident Aung San Suu Kyi. By the standards of television, it was a long story, running to about six or seven minutes. It represented these two Asian women as, in effect, two peas in a pod—alike and akin in their battle against authoritarianism, and in the stoicness with which they had endured suffering and discrimination.

The BBC story mentioned the fact that both ladies had fathers who were also politicians. But their respective husbands were not mentioned. One does not know whether this was deliberate.

To bring in the spouses would certainly have disturbed the symmetry that lay in the eyes of the story's presenter (as well as writer). Suu Kyi's husband, who died some years ago of cancer, was Michael Aris, a distinguished scholar of Tibetan Buddhism who was a decent man besides. Benazir, on the other hand, is married to a wholly unsavoury character, a fixer and operator who, during the time she was Prime Minister, was known as 'Mr Ten Per Cent'.

A woman cannot be blamed—or praised—for her husband, but as it happens the differences between Benazir and Suu Kyi run much deeper. They have displayed varying degrees of commitment to their respective countries. Ms Bhutto's long exile from Pakistan was entirely voluntary; and it was very comfortable. She chose to live in luxury in England and Dubai rather than face the prospect of being put into prison if found guilty of the charges laid against her. It was only when the Americans assured her that she could come back without hindrance that she returned to Karachi.

The Burmese lady's patriotism is far more reliable than that of her Pakistani counterpart. Benazir asks what her country can do for her, Suu Kyi asks what she can do for her country. When Michael Aris lay dying, the junta in Rangoon said they would grant Suu Kyi a permit to see her family on condition that she should not return. To see the man she loved one last time she would have to turn her back on her country, perhaps forever. It was a tragic choice—more tragic than any other modern politician, indeed any other modern individual, has had to face. No one would have held it against her had she left Burma to be with her husband and children. In the end, Suu Kyi stayed, for she knew that with her out of the way the generals would more easily consolidate their rule.

The two women also differ in the ways they have claimed their fathers' legacies. Benazir was groomed for power from an early age—like Rahul Gandhi, she was brought up to believe that to become Prime Minister of her country was her birthright. On the other hand, there was a four-decade-long interregnum between the death of Aung San and his daughter's entry into politics. It was on a visit to see her ailing mother that Suu Kyi was dragged into the democracy movement, staying on to lead and guide it through a very troubled period indeed.

Their political orientations are rather different, too. While Suu Kyi has a principled commitment to non-violence and to democratic procedure, Benazir has a rather opportunist approach to power and authority. The words that come to mind when describing the great Burmese freedom-fighter are courageous, honest, decent, principled, democratic. On the other hand, the career and credo of the Pakistani politician can be summed up in the words vain, disingenuous, delusionary, ambitious, demagogic.

## RECALLING AN EARLIER FAILURE

On my first trip to New York—back in the mid 1980s—I made a visit to the United Nations, an institution then held in somewhat higher esteem than it is now. In the plaza outside a demonstration was in progress. The protesters were Afghan men, their nationality manifest in their dress—they wore flowing pyjamas, a long loose shirt, and a circular wollen cap—and in their appearance—they were tall, sharp-featured, and bearded. ‘Down with Soviet Imperialism!’, they shouted: ‘Down! Down! Down!’. ‘Death to Gorbachev!’, they went on, ‘Death! Death! Death!’. Then they added: ‘Death to Rajiv Gandhi! Death! Death! Death!’.

Winston Churchill once said that while he was happy to criticize his country within its borders, while travelling overseas he would seek always to defend it. By the same token, while I was no fan of Rajiv Gandhi when living in Kolkata, to see him publicly abused in the middle of New York was an unnerving experience. He was, after all, the democratically elected Prime Minister of my country. Besides, the abuse carried with it a death threat.

At the time, I was teaching in a university up the coast from New York. The janitor in my department was a tall, cheerful Afghan who answered to the name of ‘Sammy’ (shorthand perhaps for ‘Samiullah’). After a few months of exchanging pleasantries I asked him about a man who was a hero to Indians of my generation, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the Frontier Gandhi, the man who taught the war-like Pathans to resist imperialism non-violently. Sammy exploded in disgust: ‘That man’, he said, ‘was a f.... Soviet agent!’.

Also teaching in the same university was the political scientist Barnett Rubin. Starting out as a specialist on this country (he had done his Ph D at the University of Chicago with the old India hands Lloyd and Suzanne Rudolph), Rubin was then shifting his focus to Afghanistan (he is now, twenty years later, recognized as one of the world’s greatest authorities on that unhappy land). He invited an Afghan refugee politician to speak, and asked me to come along. I cannot exactly recall the contents of the talk, but do remember what happened at its conclusion. As I walked out, the speaker—a thick-set, bearded man with a large turban—came up to me. ‘Indira Gandhi should not have supported the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan’, he said: ‘After all, your people and mine have such long and close ties. And India commands such great respect in Asia and Africa. If Mrs Gandhi had come out against the invasion, then other countries would have also followed suit’.

The remarks were made more in sorrow than in anger (unlike the slogans against Indira’s son shouted in the United Nations Plaza). But they were made with some feeling, and were unprompted. Recognizing me as the only Indian in the room, the speaker had spontaneously expressed his disappointment at a close friend of his country letting it down in its hour of need.

It was in December 1979 that Soviet tanks rolled into Kabul. In power in New Delhi was a minority government headed by Chaudhury Charan Singh. It was a regime based on ambition and opportunism—among the few items to its credit (it may be the only one) was that it made

some noises of protest at the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. However, that government was already on its last legs, and when fresh elections were held in January 1980 the Congress came back into power. Indira Gandhi was once more Prime Minister, and she quickly endorsed the Soviet action. The influential pro-Soviet journalist Nikhil Chakravartty visited Kabul and wrote a series of effusive reports on how the new regime was dismantling feudalism and building a socialist utopia.

After Mrs Gandhi's death, her support of the Soviet-backed regime in Kabul was endorsed by her son and successor as Prime Minister, Rajiv. Meanwhile, a resistance movement was taking shape among the Afghans. The insurgency had various strands, these differentiated by ethnicity—Pathan, Uzbek, Tajik—and by ideology—secular nationalist, Islamic jihadist, warlordist. It was funded principally by the United States, whose agent on the ground was Zia-ul-Haq's government in neighbouring Pakistan.

The fact that Pakistan had fought three wars against India and that the United States had not been an especial friend of India provided a sort of retrospective validation, to Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, for their support of the Soviet invasion. But that support was certainly ran counter to the traditions of the Indian national movement. For the Soviets in Afghanistan were, like the British in India or the French in Algeria, colonialists who had forced their rule on an unwilling populace. And despite the divergences within the resistance movement, it was clear a vast majority of Afghans regarded the Soviets as usurpers and conquerors. And yet the 'anti-colonial' Indian Government took the side of the alien rulers.

It is instructive to recall the Indian position on Afghanistan in the 1980s at this moment, when the Indian position on Myanmar (Burma) has come under searching scrutiny. In these columns, Sanjib Baruah has rightly criticized the false rhetoric of realpolitik that has been used to justify our support for the generals in Yangon. Let's not rush to endorse the democracy movement, say the amoral pundits in Delhi, for then the junta will go over wholesale to the side of the Chinese. Moreover, we need their gas, their timber, and their jewels. Back in the 1980s, these same pundits supported the government in Kabul on the grounds that our 'friends' the Soviets were behind it, while our 'enemies' the Pakistanis were against it.

The Burmese regime of the present day is brutal and authoritarian, whereas the Afghan regime of the 1980s was brutal and colonialist. Home-grown tyrannies are bad enough; but tyrannies imposed from outside are arguably even worse. The Indian support for the Soviets in Afghanistan ran contrary to our professed belief in national self-determination. Ironically, the same government, and indeed the same Prime Minister, had taken a more principled position with regard to an earlier example of imperialist aggression—namely, the American invasion of Vietnam. In March 1966, just weeks after taking over as Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi visited Washington. 'New Indian Leader Comes Begging', was how one American paper headlined its story on the trip. This was not inaccurate—for the Indians were desperate for American food aid after the monsoons had badly failed in 1964 and 1965. While sanctioning the aid, President

Lyndon Johnson asked in exchange for India to abstain from criticizing American actions in Vietnam. This Mrs Gandhi refused to do. A little later, the Indian position was made clearer when President Radhakrishnan wrote to Johnson urging that 'the United States unilaterally and without any commitments cease bombing North Vietnam'.

In the same way, the Indian silence on Burma is in sharp contrast to our consistent support for the democratic opposition in apartheid-era South Africa. After Nelson Mandela was freed from prison, the first foreign country he chose to visit was India, on the grounds that it had done more than any other to help the freedom struggle in South Africa. Mandela himself deeply admired Jawaharlal Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi; as, of course, does his fellow Nobel Laureate, fellow democrat, and fellow jailbird Aung San Suu Kyi. That makes our support for the Burmese generals now, and our support for the commissars in Kabul then, not just hypocritical and ironical, but also contemptible.

### **DEGREES OF DEGRADATION**

In recent years, there has been a sharp decline in standards of political debate in India. In and out of Parliament, issues concerning the public good are rarely discussed logically or dispassionately. The arguments more often reflect ideological prejudice or personal hostility rather than rational thought. The degradation has been palpable for some time now; but it is in the debate on India's nuclear deal with the United States that it has reached its very nadir.

I claim no expertise in energy policy or the law. I do not pretend to have grasped the nuances of the '123 agreement'. Although, as a citizen, I remain worried that nuclear reactors are (to paraphrase the American Green Ralph Nader) 'unsafe at any price', I can understand why, with the growing threat to human life posed by global warming, they might find their promoters.

This column, then, is not about the rights and wrongs of the nuclear deal. It is about the ways in which it has been discussed and debated. In this (as yet unconcluded) debate, three varieties of indecorous behaviour have been put on display. Let us call them hypocrisy, bad taste, and rank careerism.

In their statements on and arguments about the Indo-US nuclear agreement all the major political formations have been hypocritical. The BJP now warns of the danger that we will become too subservient to the United States. This is odd; for the Hindu right has in the past consistently stood for closer ties with Uncle Sam. After China invaded Tibet in 1950 it argued that India's salvation lay in an open alliance with the United States. The Jana Sangh, forerunner to today's Bharatiya Janata Party, opposed Jawaharlal Nehru's policy of non-alignment on the grounds that America was infinitely preferable to the Soviet Union. As Foreign Minister between 1977 and

1979, Atal Behari Vajpayee worked hard to dispel the image in Washington that we were clients of the Soviets. As Foreign Minister between 1998 and 2002, Jaswant Singh acted as if India fully intended to become a client of the United States. He equated himself with a mere Deputy Secretary of State; and even offered to send Indian troops to help in the illegal invasion of Iran.

Given this history, with what face now can the BJP warn of the dangers of American expansionism?

At least with regard to the United States the Communists have been more consistent. A visceral anti-Americanism has been their stock-in-trade since the beginnings of the Cold War. But their newfound concern for our 'national sovereignty' is more hard to swallow. In 1942 they put the interests of the Russian people above that of Mahatma Gandhi's national movement. In 1962 many of them supported China when it invaded India. We can be certain, even now, that if India had been buying reactors from China or Russia this would have met with their enthusiastic support, even if those deals came, on the Chinese or Russian side, with all kinds of strings attached.

Finally, the Congress Party's rather open cultivation of the United States is somewhat at odds with its previous, and mostly principled, equidistance from the world's Great Powers.

Likewise, the bad taste has also emanated from both the ruling party and the Opposition. George Fernandes's caling the Prime Minister a serial bluffer and suggesting that in another country he would have been shot has embarrassed even his most loyal friends. Jayalalithaa's insinuation that the Prime Minister was so much in favour of the deal because his daughter and son-in-law were American citizens was cheaper still. (One can find fault with Dr Manmohan Singh on many counts, but never on his integrity and patriotism. In fact, it is more likely that the hysterical anti-Americanism of some Opposition leaders is not unconnected to the fact that their own children are American residents or citizens.) Still, the Opposition's excesses in this regard were equalled or perhaps even exceeded by the comments made about them by the serving Indian Ambassador to the United States, Ronen Sen. To call opponents of the deal 'headless chickens' was petty and vain in equal measure. And Sen's fawning praise of George Bush might have made even Jaswant Singh squirm in embarrassment.

In the matter of bad taste, it is the Communists who come out least badly. Their arguments and claims about the nuclear deal might have been ill-considered, but they were not, so far as I can tell, vulgar.

I come, finally, to the rank careerism displayed in connection with this most contentious deal. On the 12th of August, a Delhi newspaper published a leading article with the title 'Trust the Treaty'. The caption gave away the line of argument. But what was significant was not what was being said but who was saying it. The article was written by S. K. Singh, at the time the Governor of the Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh. Seeing his byline, I rang a friend in Delhi. 'Surely it is unconstitutional for a serving Governor to go out and bat for the Government like

this?', I asked. 'Treat the article not as a violation of Constitutional propriety but as a job application', answered my friend: 'He wants a bigger state'.

Oddly enough, with the media and the political parties so obsessively focused on the rift between the Congress and the Left, no one else seems to have noticed S. K. Singh's transgression. I have seen no comment on it in the press. By contrast, every word uttered by Prakash Karat has been minutely examined. The comments made by George Fernandes and Jayalalithaa have been reported and deplored. The remarks, on or off the record, of Ambassador Sen, have been debated ad nauseam. One newspaper has called for his immediate recall; another has run a long article defending him.

As a leader of a major political party, Prakash Karat is fully entitled to express his views on the nuclear deal, in private or in public. So are Fernandes and Jayalalithaa, although one would wish they used more decorous language. Ambassador Sen was certainly foolish in saying what he did. But he said what he did on the spur of the moment. In contrast, his former Foreign Service colleague and fellow political appointee S. K. Singh devoted a good deal of thought to the piece he published in the Hindustan Times. I have no doubt that he believed in what he said, and no doubt either that he knew that, given the position he held, that he should not be saying it in public. He might have calculated that, in the present climate of unconcern for norms and propriety, anything goes.

He was right. It was not just that his transgression was not noticed; it was actually rewarded. In the reshuffle of Governors announced last week, S. K. Singh was shifted from Arunachal Pradesh to Rajasthan—a more populous state, a much more important one, and closer (in all respects) to Delhi.

On the whole, and from all sides, the debate around the nuclear deal has been largely lacking in decorum. Its spirit is perhaps best captured in the Bengali word 'abhadra'. Even in this crowded field, it should not be too hard to choose the most abhadra of the acts on display—namely, S. K. Singh's job application. That it has been so quickly acted upon, and in his favour, is merely a marker of the times we live in.

### **SMALL STATE, LARGE NATION**

Goa is the youngest part of India, having joined the Union only in December 1961. It is the smallest state in the country; one can drive across it in less than a day. It is one of the least populous, having less than two million people. And it is one of the most interesting.

The culture of Goa is rich, and complex: Hindus rubbing shoulders with Christians, Konkani speakers with Marathi ones. The ecology is diverse, too—a glorious coast-line at one end, the Western Ghats at the other, rivers and rich green paddy fields in between. The Portuguese were

here twice as long as the British in the rest of India, and their long residence has left its mark in the way the houses and offices and (especially) churches look, and in the way the people speak, dress, sing and (especially) cook.

I first visited Goa in December 1984, twenty-three years after it was ‘liberated’ from Portuguese rule. I was back there earlier this month, a further twenty-three years later. In this time Goa appears to have become more solidly part of India.

One sign of this is the declining influence of Portuguese. In the first house I visited on my first trip, the family spoke to me in English but to one another in Portuguese. Now, I was told, the language had all but disappeared. Back in 1984 many of the shop signs in Panaji were in Portuguese. I particularly remember one that read; ‘Typografia Prafulla’. If the business still exists, it probably goes under the name of ‘Prafulla Printers’.

The languages that Goans themselves speak are Konkani and Marathi. But since this is a state very heavily visited by outsiders—Indian and foreign—these are supplemented in everyday discourse by English and Hindi. I was struck, on this visit, by the proliferation of slogans in Devanagari, painted on billboards and boundary walls, and advertising all manner of products, from mobile phones to motor bikes. These being commercials, the words were often accompanied by faces, usually of Hindi film stars.

There were other signs of Goa’s integration with the nation. I saw a ‘Brahmakumari Yoga Ashram’, which must advocate a physical regimen which not many would associate, culturally and historically, as being compatible with being Goan. More substantially, in Panaji itself I came across a large and well appointed park named after B. R. Ambedkar. In the middle of the garden was a statue of the great man, holding a copy of the Constitution.

That Constitution that Ambedkar helped draft gave every adult Indian the vote. However, when India became a Republic, on 26th January 1950, Goa was still a Portuguese colony. Twelve years later, the Indian army walked into the territory and, after the garrison there surrendered, announced that it had been reunited with the motherland. Shortly afterwards the Goans were allowed to vote for the first time in their very long history. As in other parts of India, they took to the franchise as a duck to water. In the most recent Assembly elections, held in May this year, almost 70% of the electorate cast their vote.

There is a distinction to be made between ‘integration’ and ‘assimilation’. The Goans, by and large, are comfortable with the former; what they really fear is the latter. In the first decade after Liberation, the most serious threat to Goan identity came from the neighbouring state of Maharashtra. The main political force in the territory, the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party, vigorously campaigned for Goa to be merged into that state. The danger was linguistic as much as it was territorial—for with the argument that Goa was really part of Maharashtra went the sub-text that Konkani was really a dialect of Marathi.



In a referendum held in the late 1960s, the Goans chose not to join Maharashtra. In subsequent decades, there was a vigorous revival of a Konkani identity. After Goa was elevated from Union Territory status to full statehood in 1987, Konkani was bestowed with the title of ‘official’ language. But now a fresh challenge presented itself—this posed not by Marathi or Maharashtrians, but by Outsiders in General. Some non-Goans came to Goa in search of jobs; others in search of a holiday home; yet others in search of Nirvana. Previously isolated beaches became the home of bums and drug addicts; a rash of ugly and uglier hotels and resorts came up alongside.

There are twenty-eight States in India; twenty-eight or more ways of living, speaking, dressing, and believing. Now and then, movements have arisen in some States expressing their disenchantment with India and Indians, based on grievances and resentments real and imagined. Most of the time, however, the people living in these various States are happy enough also to be counted citizens of the larger nation of which they are part. Since 1961, Goa and Goans have had occasion to be irritated by India and Indians, but the irritation has never endured long enough for them to ever consider divorce or separation. In her book *Goa: A Daughter’s Story*, Maria Aurora Couto writes of a friend of hers called José Pereira, a scholar and musician with a ‘personality which is proudly Goan and Indian’. One can say much the same for the state as a whole

## **TWO CHEERS FOR BLASPHEMY**

How one reads the protests by the Governments of Iran and Pakistan at Salman Rushdie being made a knight depends on where one is placed on the political spectrum. Those who incline to the right might dismiss it as yet another illustration of the illiberalism of Islam. On the other hand, some on the left might welcome it as a display of anti-imperialism. After all, if Britain assumes it has the right to invade Iraq, surely Pakistan and Iran can legitimately call into question the honours system of Britain itself?

Interestingly, while Teheran and Islamabad have been vocal, New Delhi has been quiet about the anointing of Sir Salman. This notwithstanding the fact that there are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan or in Iran, that Rushdie was born in this country and still considers himself in some way part of it, that we were the first to ban his novel *The Satanic Verses*, and that we have the closest ties to Great Britain. This silence, I submit, is a product of confusion. The dilemma facing the Government of India has, so to say, four horns. If it is to issue a formal statement, then this has to be worded such that it will not offend Iran, not alienate Great Britain, not displease our own Muslims, and not give a chance to the Hindu right to dismiss it as ‘minority appeasement’. This is a task that is beyond the most skilled wordsmith in South Block. The government has found it prudent, therefore, to say nothing at all.

I think I know a way out of the dilemma. This is to place Salman Rushdie alongside Maqbool Fida Hussain. They have much in common. For one thing, both are greatly gifted artists. To be

sure, their art is not to everyone's taste. I have heard Hussain described as 'India's finest limited-overs painter', and Rushdie as a man who 'exhibits sparks of brilliance amidst a raging fire of bombast'. These judgements are in part a product of sour grapes (in fact, the first comes from the son of another painter, and the second from a fellow writer). They are also a response to the sheer promiscuity of these artists' creations. If a man writes or paints so much, the cynics ask, can all or any of it be good? The critic's answer is that artists must ultimately be judged not by their worst but by their best works. And at the top of their form, both Rushdie and Hussain are world-class.

Second, Rushdie and Hussain are akin in their deep love for this country. Although he has lived elsewhere for most of his life, the novelist returns again and again to India in his writings. On the other hand, Hussain has lived most of his nine decades in his homeland, and has travelled widely within it. Both writer and painter have marvelled at the colour and vibrancy of our mythical and craft traditions, and incorporated them in their work.

Third, Rushdie and Hussain are alike in the controversy that attends their personal lives. Both have gone through several marriages and many relationships. Both have openly expressed their love (not to say lust) for a beautiful woman much younger than themselves.

Finally, the novelist and the painter are alike in having offended the sensibilities of the seriously bigoted as well as the merely pious. The Satanic Verses is by no means Rushdie's finest work, but, nearly twenty years after publication, it remains its most controversial. Hussain has done many better things than the sketches of Hindu gods and goddesses that keep him in the news and keep his lawyers in the courts. Both artists have paid dearly for these perceived transgressions. Rushdie had to live underground for years; more recently, Hussain has been forced into exile.

Despite these (and other) similarities, there is one notable difference in the careers of the two men. This is that Rushdie's sworn enemies (and putative murderers) are radicals who profess allegiance to Islam, whereas those who vandalise Hussain's works, and threaten to tear him from limb to limb, are Hindu extremists. To be sure, in his day Rushdie has offended some Hindu bigots too, while Hussain is not exactly a favourite of the mullahs. However, their main and most dogged adversaries owe allegiance to two very different fundamentalist traditions.

It is this difference that opens up a space for the Government of India to act on. To say a kind word or two about Rushdie will certainly displease Islamic radicals. To praise Hussain might offend the Hindu chauvinist. But to honour both at the same time would underline the government's appreciation of artistic excellence as well as affirm its commitment to artistic freedom. With Hussain desperate to come back to India, and Rushdie longing for some kind of public approbation from the land of his birth, cannot New Delhi devise a way of simultaneously saluting them both?

What precise form this honouring should take can be debated. Perhaps the Prime Minister can throw a joint reception for Rushdie and Hussain, to which leaders of all political parties are

invited. Perhaps their names can figure in the next Republic Day awards. Last year, the CEO of Pepsi, Indira Nooyi, was honoured with the Padma Bhushan; surely Rushdie is a more distinguished NRI than her? He could be awarded the Padma Vibhushan, while Hussain, since he already has that honour, could be dignified by the Bharat Ratna. Or, if this is considered too excessive, perhaps Rushdie can merely be invited to lecture by the Ministry of Culture, and Hussain assured by the government that he can live safely in his own country.

In any case, something should be done, and at the official level, to honour these very fine—and brave—artists. By saluting Rushdie and Hussain together, the government will even-handedly offend bigots both Hindu and Muslim and, more crucially, harness the support of the much more populous if thus far quiescent forces of the vital centre. In the first few decades of Independence, this centre was proudly represented by the Congress party, which kept the forces of extremism at bay while nurturing the inclusive, democratic ideals of the Indian Constitution. More recently, however, the Congress has tended to humour and even submit to the forces of religious intolerance. It was India's Grand Old Party which overturned the judgement in the Shah Bano case; it was the same party that opened the locks in Ayodhya in 1986 and permitted the destruction of the Babri Masjid six years later.

When, back in 1989, Rajiv Gandhi's administration banned The Satanic Verses, the historian Dharma Kumar wrote that this was 'a sign of the Government's weakness'. 'In a secular state', she pointed out, 'blasphemy should not in itself be a cognizable offence; the President of India is not the defender of any nor of all faiths.' It is past time that the Government of India recovered its lost secularist soul, past time that it stood squarely against fundamentalists whether these be Hindu or Muslim, Christian or Sikh. A bow in the direction of Rushdie and Hussain would be a good way to begin.

## **POWER WOMEN OF NORTH AND SOUTH**

The day the U. P. election results came in I was having lunch with a friend in Mumbai. 'Mayawati appears to be the Jayalalithaa of the South', he said, before passing on to other matters. But his remark stayed with me; the more I thought about it, the more the comparison made sense.

Mayawati and Jayalalithaa are alike, first of all, in having had a male mentor. Jayalalithaa was a fading actress when she was brought into the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam by M. G. Ramachandran. Mayawati was preparing for the civil services examination when she was asked by Kanshi Ram to join his then fledgeling political movement. Whether their respective relationships had a romantic element (as was strongly rumoured) is, for the present purposes, besides the point. What is relevant is that the two ladies were 'tutored' in politics by a man who had established himself in the field before they did.

Mayawati and Jayalalithaa are alike, secondly, in having gone beyond their mentors in carving out independent political identities of their own. Admittedly, without the patient organizational work of their teachers they would have not had a base to build upon or exploit. The AIADMK was a product of the thousands of fan clubs or manrams that supported MGR through his career in films (and beyond). The rapid rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party would have been inconceivable without the Scheduled Caste Employees Federations previously created and nurtured by Kanshi Ram.

That said, it is striking how successful Mayawati and Jayalalithaa have been in transferring the loyalties of the party faithful to themselves. In each case, they were helped by the prolonged illness (and eventual demise) of the man they followed and, in time, succeeded. But it is a mark of the strength of their own characters (and the nature of their ambitions) that they have so completely transcended the mark of their political apprenticeship. Within a year of MGR's death the AIADMK was identified with Jayalalithaa and with her alone. Mayawati was able to identify the party with herself even while Kanshi Ram was alive.

It is instructive, in this connection, to compare the trajectory of their careers with that of another lady in Indian politics, Sonia Gandhi. Ten years after she assumed leadership of the Congress, Sonia Gandhi still has to seek legitimacy from the memory and legacy of her husband, her mother-in-law, and her grandfather-in-law. Her speeches are peppered with references to Rajivji, Indiraji, and Panditji. To provide further reassurance, portraits of these three worthies look down on her as she speaks. But the power women of North and South have no need for such crutches or anchors. Jayalalithaa is not compelled to make reference to MGR in her speeches. The name and memory of Kanshi Ram are conspicuously absent in the press conferences convened by the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh.

In their authoritativeness, Mayawati and Jayalalithaa are dissimilar from Sonia Gandhi, yet akin to that other and older Mrs Gandhi, namely, Indira. Like Indira Gandhi, the ladies of North and South run their parties as if it were a personal fiefdom. Dissent or even reasoned argument is impermissible. Like the senior Mrs Gandhi, they both have a favoured group of trusted bureaucrats who are assigned positions of power (and profit). Like her, again, they can be vengeful towards political opponents. And like the architect of the notorious Emergency, Mayawati and Jayalalithaa are not sympathetic to the idea of press freedom. Both have encouraged and condoned attacks on journalists who have criticized them.

Viewed sympathetically, the toughness that Mayawati and Jayalalithaa display may have something to do with the hurdles that stand in the way of a woman seeking to make her way in a man's world. Both Jayalalithaa and Mayawati have laboured under a double handicap. Not only was Jayalalitha a woman, she was also a Brahmin, this in a state where political hegemony was enjoyed by Non-Brahmins. Not only was Mayawati a woman, she was also a Dalit, this in a state where economic, political and cultural power has been the preserve of Brahmins and Rajputs. To fight their corner, to win elections, both ladies have had to cultivate a certain ruthlessness.

Writing in the 1970s, the veteran British journalist James Cameron remarked that ‘there is not and never has been a working-class woman with a function in Indian politics, and it is hard to say when there ever will be’. Cameron could write as he did because the only women he knew in Indian politics were the likes of Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Sarojini Naidu. Compared to those aristocratic ladies even Jayalalithaa is of plebeian background, whereas Mayawati is of course a genuine subaltern. Cameron found it improbable that there ever would be a ‘working class’ woman with a function in Indian politics. Two decades later, two women were Chief Ministers of the largest states in North and South India respectively. They had reached there without the benefit of wealth or family background.

Mayawati and Jayalalithaa are also alike in that neither has yet reached the summit of her ambition. Jayalalithaa has had two long terms as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. Mayawati has previously had three brief stints as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh; in this, her fourth term, she can, if she so wishes, serve a full five years. In the context of the viciousness of Indian politics these are impressive achievements. But the ladies are not done yet. Both have made it clear that they hope to be Prime Minister of India one day. It is because of that ambition that Jayalalithaa paid somewhat greater attention in her second term to development and governance. And Mayawati’s larger goal is manifest in the expansion of the Bahujan Samaj Party into the states of southern and western India.

(Were I a betting man, I would place some money on Mayawati becoming Prime Minister. It is a long shot; but Jayalalithaa’s is a longer shot still. For one thing, Uttar Pradesh has almost twice as many Lok Sabha seats as Tamil Nadu; for another, the Dalit constituency is an all-India one, making it easier for Mayawati to have an impact outside her own state.)

Finally, Mayawati and Jayalalithaa are alike in that to the middle-class sensibility (mine and yours) their personalities are less than appealing. Neither, it appears, has a sense of humour. Harsh, unforgiving, strong-willed and bloody-minded, they are autocrats who do not look with especial favour on the institutions and processes of democracy. That said, they share one redeeming feature which marks them out from the competition. ‘Politician’s progeny are a curse’, said Madhu Limaye, a remark that is of chilling relevance in India today, with almost all parties having become family firms. At least Mayawati and Jayalalithaa have no children.

Tags: AIADMK, BSP Bahujan Samaj Party, democracy, dynastic rule, feminism, gender, Jayalalitha, Mayawati

## **WHO IS A PATRIOT?**

The novelist U. R. Anantha Murthy has long objected to the characterization of the Sangh Parivar as the ‘saffron brigade’. Saffron is a beautiful colour, the colour of renunciation, worn by monks and others of great and good character. Why should we cede it so easily to a bunch of bigots?

To me, at any rate, the argument is compelling, and ever since I heard Anantha Murthy make it, I have eschewed the word ‘saffron’ in describing a band who, far from renouncing anything, are hungry for power and all the goodies that go with it. However, a recent experience made me aware that we were in danger of ceding other, and equally resonant words, to the men on our right. At a meeting held in the magnificent old convocation hall of the University of Mumbai, I had just heard a paper presented on the life and work of the jurist M. C. Chagla. The paper was entitled: ‘A Lawyer and a Gentleman’. When question time came, I suggested to the author that he add, to the title, the word ‘Patriot’.

Afterwards, in the coffee break, I was set upon by a gentleman who had recently retired from a high position in the University. ‘Is it only because he was a Muslim that we have to add that qualifier “patriot”?’ he said. ‘I object to this kind of patronizing labelling’. I reeled under the onslaught. For in making my remark I had completely forgotten that Chagla’s first names were Muhammad Carim. What I remembered instead was how, at the age of eighty, he had bravely stood up to the Emergency. In suggesting that he be referred to as a ‘patriot’, I also had in mind his incorruptibility as a judge, his fearless investigations into corruption in high places (as for example his report on the Mundhra scandal), and his nurturing, as a Union Minister, of such institutions as the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. Given all that he had done in his public career, I felt that to merely call him a ‘lawyer and a gentleman’ was to sell him short.

It is necessary, at this point, to distinguish between ‘patriotism’ and ‘nationalism’. A German thinker once put it this way: ‘A patriot is someone who loves his country. A nationalist is someone who hates other countries’. This distinction is sustained by the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, which has a single, straightforward definition of patriotism—‘vigorous support for one’s country’—but which offers at least three meanings for nationalism, viz.: ‘patriotic feeling, principles, or efforts; an extreme form of this marked by a feeling of superiority over other countries; advocacy of political independence for a particular country’.

In the depths of the First World War, Rabindranath Tagore travelled to Japan and the United States to warn them against emulating the destructive nationalism of the countries of Western Europe. As he put it:

‘The political civilisation which has sprung up from the soil of Europe and is overrunning the world, like some prolific weed, is based upon exclusiveness. It is always watchful to keep the aliens at bay or to exterminate them. It is carnivorous and cannibalistic in its tendencies, it feeds upon the resources of other peoples and tries to swallow their whole future. It is always afraid of other races achieving eminence, naming it as a peril, and tries to thwart all symptoms of greatness outside its own boundaries, forcing down races of men who are weaker, to be eternally fixed in their weakness.’

Tagore was emphatically not a nationalist, but can we say with equal certainty that he was not a patriot? Did not his work in and for this land, his travels to its far corners, his sensitive portrayals

of its landscapes and its peoples, his friendships with Indians of all castes and creeds, all bespeak of a deep, deep love for India? These words, from a debate with Gandhi in those momentous years 1920-21, demonstrate (I believe) that Tagore was a patriot without being a nationalist:

‘Today, at this critical moment of the world’s history, cannot India rise above her limitations and offer the great ideal to the world that will work towards harmony in co-operation between the different people of the earth?... The idea of India is against the intense consciousness of the separateness of one’s own people from others, and which inevitably leads to ceaseless conflicts... Let us be rid of all false pride and rejoice at any lamp being lit at any corner of the world, knowing that it is a part of the common illumination of our house...’

Tagore died in 1941. Five years later, a group of some two hundred odd Indians met to discuss the elements of a Constitution for a soon-to-be free nation. Their discussions took three years, and are reproduced, in full, in thirteen bulky volumes reprinted by the Lok Sabha Secretariat. The salient points are summarized in the Constitution of India, which, true to the teachings of Tagore, basks in the glow of numerous lamps, not all of them lit in India. Its republicanism is influenced by the example of France and the United States, its federalism by that of Canada and Switzerland, its emphasis on Cabinet Government by the United Kingdom. This is not to say that it is wholly or even largely derivative. To the contrary, many of its most important features are based on Indian experiences and ideas.

Nationalism in other countries necessarily involved the demonizing of other countries. Without the hatred of France, and memories of battles against France, there would be no Great Britain; without the hatred of Great Britain, and memories of battles against Britons, there would be no United States of America. On the other hand, India became a nation without fighting a war or demonizing its rulers (Gandhi’s best friend was an Englishman, C. F. Andrews, and he, Tagore, and Nehru all admired the best in English and, indeed, European culture).

The process of nation-formation in other lands often rested upon the forcing down the throats of citizens of a common language or common religion, or both (the religion was sometimes called Marxism). On the other hand, one can be an Indian and practice any faith (or no faith or all) and speak the language of one’s choosing (even the language of the erstwhile colonizers). The idea of India is *sui generis*, and in two fundamental respects: first, it is non-adversarial with regard to the rest of the world, and second, it is inclusive with regard to itself.

Although much amended and bent, the Constitution of India is still somewhat like its framers meant it to be—a charter for a democratic republic of men and women who all live in the same territory without speaking the same language or subscribing to the same faith. Anyone who believes in the democratic and pluralist ideals of the Constitution can (and should) be termed a ‘patriot’. It is a word we must be allowed to use freely, without fear of being thought politically incorrect. As for M. C. Chagla, he did more than believe in the ideals of the Constitution—he upheld them all through his long life, whether as lawyer, judge, Minister, or elder statesman.

While saluting him as a patriot, I shall withhold that label from the Sangh Parivar, whose commitment to the Constitution of India is less than certain. A label more appropriate to them, perhaps, is 'chauvinist'.

## **LONG DISTANCE NATIONALISMS**

A friend from Sri Lanka recently visited Bangalore, and not unexpectedly was in a mood of dark depression. The always uneasy cease-fire between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the Sri Lankan Government had broken down. Civil war had resumed. Once more, bombs were going off in the heart of Colombo; once more, the Army was burning villages in the North.

It is one of the tragic ironies of modern South Asian history that the most beautiful parts of the sub-continent are also the most violent. Kashmir, Bastar, Nagaland—the list of lovely places wracked by civil war is long. Yet Sri Lanka is in a class of its own. The bulk of India, and Indians, can carry on living as if Kashmir and Nagaland never existed. But in that little island, the clash between recalcitrant rebels and a bloody-minded government affects almost every citizen of the nation.

There is another difference. Like Kashmir and Nagaland, Sri Lanka is beautiful; unlike them, it has a highly skilled and educated population. Had there been no war, the Tamils and Sinhala between them would have taken their country to the forefront of the knowledge economy. Instead of California being nervous about losing jobs to Bangalore, Bangalore would have complained of business being 'outsourced' to Jaffna and Colombo. Further, as a self-contained island Sri Lanka is easier of access than Kashmir or Nagaland; thus, had peace reigned, the tourist trade would also have been booming.

I called the rebels in Sri Lanka 'recalcitrant'; the government, 'bloody-minded'. However, there is a third and most complicating factor to the conflict, which is the Tamil diaspora. One reason that the Tiger supremo Vellupillai Prabhakaran won't carry negotiations forward to a peaceful conclusion is that like many dogmatists he finds compromise difficult; another reason is that large sections of the emigré population will not let him. In the autumn of 2000, I spent six weeks travelling through Switzerland, talking to members of the Sri Lankan Tamil community. While I did meet a Muslim whose village had been attacked by Prabhakaran's men, and a Christian priest who worked for reconciliation, the vast majority of the Hindu Tamils living in the Alps supported the Tigers, totally. Further, they were prepared to settle for nothing else than independence. I asked a Tamil leader in Zurich whether he hoped the Norwegians—then as now overseeing the 'peace' process—would be able to get them some real autonomy in a unified Sri Lanka. The answer was swift, and decisive: 'We have lost everything—homes, lands, forests, families. What for? In 1985 we might have accepted autonomy. But now, after all this struggle and sacrifice, what can we accept? Only an independent Tamil homeland, Eelam'.



In this respect the Tamil exiles are representative of diasporic communities everywhere. By and large, the New York Jews are far more extreme in their defence of Israel's borders and the Israeli army's excesses than Jews who live within the Jewish homeland. As in Sri Lanka, there are many reasons why a workable settlement has not been achieved in Palestine. The Palestinians have been unable to present a united front; sections of the Israeli establishment are plagued by a peculiar form of paranoia. But it is quite possible that the contending parties could have forged a lasting agreement had the American Jews allowed the American Government to honestly play the role of a honest broker, or if they had not so recklessly pushed the right-wing in Israel to expand Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories. At every turn, the expatriate Jews have supported and endorsed the most uncompromising elements within Israel. They have also ensured that the Americans can never place on the table an agreement which is truly even-handed between Israel and the Palestinians.

Recall that the movement for a Sikh homeland in the 1980s was also sustained, in more senses than one, by diasporic Sikh communities based in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. It was they who supplied the money which bought the arms used by Khalistani terrorists in the Punjab. If they were not raising money, they were lobbying the United States Government to come down hard on the Government of India. It was also the exiles who most assiduously denied that the Sikhs were part of the larger Indian family, denying, for example, that they shared a roti-beti rishta with the Hindus, breaking bread with them and marrying into their families. As Khushwant Singh famously put it, the vocal Khalistani ideologue in Washington, Ganga Singh Dhillon would be more honest if he changed his name to Potomac Singh Dhillon.

By the late 1980s the movement for Khalistan had collapsed within the Punjab. But it lingered on in the diaspora. I remember an extended conversation sometime in 1997 with a Sikh taxi driver who drove me from San Francisco airport across the bay into Berkeley. He was convinced that the creation of Khalistan was around the corner. He claimed that forty Senators were already behind a Bill which was going to be introduced in the U. S. Congress mandating a Sikh homeland. Once another ten Senators had been persuaded—or bought—the Bill would be brought to the table of President Bill Clinton, who would sign his assent. And since the United States was now the sole superpower, the Government of India had no alternative but to heed their command. The next year, the cabbie's geopolitical calculations were shown to be spectacularly awry, when President Clinton visited India and paid glowing tributes to its democratic traditions without so much as mentioning Khalistan.

Like the Sikhs and the Jews, the Irish in America have also supplied arms and money to extremists at home while seeking to stall any negotiations with the other side. But why do diasporic communities promote the most extreme forms of nationalism? One reason is psychological, namely, that they are doubly alienated, not at home (for whatever reason) in their country of origin and not at home in their country of residence either. Since by virtue of skin colour or faith (or both) they cannot ever entirely belong in America, they maintain a deep

emotional connection to their land of origin, which they then wish to purge of all contaminating influences. It is because they want a place where they can at last be fully at home that American Jews want a Israel sans Palestinians, American Sikhs a Khalistan without Hindus, and American Irishmen an Eire where not so much as a shadow of a Protestant will fall.

Khalistan is now dead and buried. After the fiasco of the Indian Peace Keeping Force we are keeping well clear of Sri Lanka. And Palestine and Ireland are far away. Still, India is not entirely free of the blighting effects of long-distance nationalism. I have in mind the activities of right-wing Hindus in the U. K. and especially in America, who have provided strong support—financial and ideological—for such extremist organizations as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Like their Jewish or Sikh counterparts, these Hindus are dangerous as well as hypocritical. Dangerous, for their activities have fuelled a cycle of violence and counter-violence in pursuit of the fantasy of a India that is essentially and emphatically ‘Hindu’. Hypocritical, for they will not put their limbs where their money goes, choosing to live on in the West while professing their love for India. Inspired by Khushwant Singh, I shall advise these diasporic nationalists to stop thinking of Bharat Mata—who can take care of herself—and instead learn Latin and take an annual sin-cleansing dip in the Mississippi.

### **PUBLIC OFFICE, PRIVATE GAIN**

‘Public service’ is now a less-than-clean word, associated in the middle-class mind with corruption and nepotism. It was not always so. One of my abiding childhood memories is of opening the door on a winter evening to Bhawani Singh, a peon who worked in the Forest Research Institute. A Garhwali from the Pindari ghati, it was Bhawani’s job to unlock the laboratory that my father headed in the morning and to close it down at night. At five p. m. the siren would sound to signal the end of office hours; fifteen minutes later my father would come cycling into the driveway. Half an hour later he would be followed by Bhawani Singh. Usually, it fell to me when he knocked to open the door. ‘Beta, daftar ki chabi laya hoon’, he would say, as he handed over the keys to me, ‘ye saab ko de dena’.

During school vacations I had sometimes to open the door for Bhawani Singh in the mornings as well. ‘Beta, daftar ki chabi laoge’, he would say, and take the keys when I brought them with the same loving care as he handed them over in the evening. I can recall, as I write, the tone of reverence with which he used the words: ‘daftar ki chabi’.

Another of my childhood memories concerns the staff car of the Forest Research Institute. My father was allowed its use rarely—only when going out of town on official business (otherwise he cycled to work). It was a beautiful vehicle, a blue Dodge that, in those insular, swadeshi-oriented days, was the very height of exotica. The driver, a man named Mahanand, kept it in prime condition, spending hours polishing it. In keeping with his steed, and status, he himself wore a dashing blue uniform complete with a peaked cap.

About four or five times a year, Mahanand and his Dodge would show up at our doorstep, to convey my father to the Dehradun railway station. Each time I would ask my father to allow me to savour a sweet minute or two sitting inside the car. I knew it would be scandalous to accompany him to the station, so I would ask to come till the Institute gate, or even to the end of the road. My wish was never granted. As the Dodge sped away, I would gaze longingly at its bright blue back.

Truth be told, both Bhawani Singh and my father were merely representative of the times. Among Indians of all classes then hung the clean if somewhat antiseptic air of the freedom movement. This was especially true of those in public service; whether unlettered peon or scientist with a Ph D, to be in the employ of the Government of India was recognized as an honour that, despite (or perhaps even because of) its lack of material reward, somehow elevated you above your countrymen. With this sense of honour went a sense of duty and responsibility. Hence the respect with which Bhawani Singh treated the laboratory keys placed in his charge; hence also the doggedness with which my father would refuse to allow me to sit in the Dodge that Mahanand drove.

In the 1960s, a majority of the Cabinet Ministers of the Government of India were pure as driven snow, judges of courts high and low could not be bribed, journalists had not begun to take freebies, and cricketers would have not known how to fix a match. By the 1970s, things had begun to change. To quote another example from personal experience, my girlfriend at University came to college in her father's official car. This, compared to what was the norm before, constituted the gross misuse of a public office, but, compared to what was to come afterwards, was the very epitome of Gandhian austerity. Through the 1980s and 1990s, officials and (especially) politicians up and down the ladder shamelessly exploited their position for personal gain.

Jorge Luis Borges once wrote, with regard to his own country, that 'the State is impersonal; the Argentine can conceive only of personal relations. Therefore, to him, robbing public funds is not a crime. I am noting a fact; I am not justifying or excusing it'. This can certainly serve as a description of large sections of the Indian State today. My own impression is that politicians have been most flagrant in their abuse of public institutions and public funds, followed by officials, and last of all by scientists.

In holding this opinion, I do not think that I am being unduly swayed by the fact that I come from a family of scientists. I believe most Indians would share this impression; that scientists on the rolls of the Government of India are somehow more honest in their dealings than politicians or civil servants. Which is why the recent charges against Dr. R. A. Mashelkar have caused such discomfort. For more than a decade, Dr Mashelkar held the most important post in the Indian scientific establishment, which is Director-General of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). As the CSIR D-G, he was made chairman of an expert committee to look into patent laws. The report, submitted after Dr Mashelkar demitted office, was found by two

eagle-eyed researchers to have lifted chunks, without attribution, from a report prepared by an Oxford researcher at the behest of multinational pharmaceutical companies. In the resultant furore Dr Mashelkar withdrew his report, while claiming that the error was accidental, and unprecedented. Soon it turned out that in a book on intellectual property that he co-authored with another Indian in 2004, Dr Mashelkar had based some of his findings, again without attribution, on a paper written by a British academic in 1996.

In his time at the CSIR, Dr Mashelkar had a reputation for dynamism, for infusing life and energy into a somnolent organization. To be sure, he did things scientists were not supposed to do. For example, he was felicitated in a function hosted by the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh. Again, Dr Mashelkar joined the board of Reliance Industries very soon after leaving office.

Breaking bread with the RSS, cosying up to corporate India—these are things we have become accustomed to, from our journalists and social scientists at any rate. We should perhaps not be too judgemental about a scientist following the same route. However, the charges of plagiarism will be harder to wish away. For nothing can be more damaging to a scientist than to be told that his conclusions are stolen from someone or somewhere else.

As I write this, news comes in that Dr Mashelkar has resigned from the ‘Technical Expert Group on Patent Law Issues’. Although belated—it comes several weeks after the charges of plagiarism were made public—it is a welcome acknowledgement of error, if not negligence. With this the controversy in the press will die down. However, Dr Mashelkar has still to withstand the proper scrutiny of his peers. I would be most interested in the reactions of the scientific academies of which he is a member, sometimes a leading member. This will be a test of their integrity, as well as their courage.

## **REGIONALISM AND THE REPUBLIC**

The recent attacks on Bihari labourers by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) are criminal acts, and deserve to be treated as such by the security forces, and by the people of Assam. But they also need to be viewed historically, as an undoubtedly perverted manifestation of a popular sentiment that has existed since the beginning of the Indian Republic, and which has indeed shaped and reshaped that Republic. This is a sentiment based on the attachment to one's language and locality.

‘Regionalism’, to give the sentiment a name (or academic label), has come in different forms and been accompanied by varying degrees of violence. The first and most legitimate kind of regionalism has demanded a separate space or state of one's own, withal a space or state resting securely within the Union of India. This variety of regionalism was pioneered by the Telugu-speaking residents of the erstwhile Madras Presidency. The forms of protest it used were attacks on state property, and the hunger-fast, most definitively in the case of Potti Sriramulu, who in

1952 died after not eating for fifty-two days, his death leading in the short-term to the creation of the state of Andhra Pradesh and in the long-term to the wholesale redrawing of the map of India on linguistic lines.

The creation of states based on language did not, however, lead to the extinction of regional sentiments. This now expressed itself in the shape of asking for a better deal from the Centre. The pioneers here were the Tamils, who argued that the Central Government was a captive of North Indian (and specifically Hindi-speaking) interests. The protests were loud, and successful; in 1967, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam became the first regional party to win power through the ballot box. They were later emulated by the Akali Dal in Punjab, the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh, and the Asom Gana Parishad in Assam, all of whom won state elections by successfully claiming that they stood for the rights of their regions against the hegemonic domination of the Centre. These parties proclaimed themselves regional by their very names, but it is also possible to view the West Bengal unit of the CPM—at least during the period when it was led by Jyoti Basu and its finances taken care of by Dr Ashok Mitra—as a regional party claiming to stand for the interests of Bengal and Bengalis against the Machiavellian designs of New Delhi.

The redrawing of India's map, meanwhile, still left people dissatisfied. The success of regionalism spawned a new species which academics were to name sub-regionalism. For within the new states based on language there yet existed groups who were minorities in the state as a whole, but who occupied a definite territory within it, and who by virtue of language or ethnicity had enough to bring them together and to bind them against the majority community in that state. These communities include the Nepalis in West Bengal and the Bodo-speakers in Assam, both of whom organized movements for separate states of their own, but had to be content in the end with autonomous councils within the existing order. More successful were the hill people of Uttar Pradesh, whose protests delivered to them a new state called Uttaranchal, and the tribal and other residents of the Chotanagpur Plateau, who were finally to claim, from a reluctant Bihar, the state of Jharkhand for which they had been fighting for from well before Independence.

The kinds of regionalism itemized in the preceding paragraphs are mostly legitimate. To ask for a state within India—or an autonomous council with a state—where one can feel secure about one's identity, is not necessarily inconsistent either with democracy or with patriotism. One can successfully, and happily, be both Tamil (or Kannadiga, or Malayali, or Gujarati) and Indian. However, in the history of our nation, regionalism has sometimes taken the form of parochialism. This can be benign, as in the claims—or pretensions—of the Bengali *bhadralok* that their literature, music, dress and cuisine are superior to those found anywhere else in India. But it can also be bloody, as in the attacks on Bihari labourers by the ULFA cadres, behind which rests the belief that only Assamese-speakers have the right to live in Assam.

If the leaders in the former or benign variety of parochialism have been the Bengalis, the pioneers of this latter or bloody variety were the Maharashtrians. In the mid 1960s, Shiv Sena

goons in Bombay began to attack South Indians as ‘outsiders’ to the city. Udupi restaurants were torched, and offices and factories warned not to employ South Indians in their establishments. In later years, the ire of the Shiv Sena has been vented against Bengalis and Biharis, likewise viewed by them as interlopers in the sacred soil of Maharashtra.

Between the actions of the Shiv Sena and the ULFA, Bihari migrant labourers have also been killed by Khalistani terrorists in Punjab, and by the mujahideen in Kashmir. These killings are crimes as defined by the Indian Penal Code; they are also, and more disturbingly, a challenge to the very idea of India. The Constitution of India grants its citizens the right to live and work in any part of the Union. Free movement is the basis of citizenship; only if it can be assured can we claim to be one nation from Kashmir to Kanyakumari (or from Kohima to Kandla).

The most militant and (if you will) dangerous form of regionalism is based on the desire, or hope, or fantasy, to leave the Republic of India and form a separate nation of one’s own. This is the hope (or fantasy) that once animated A. Z. Phizo’s Naga National Council, and now animates T. Muivah’s National Socialist Council of Nagaland. Likewise, generations of Kashmiri militants—and non-Kashmiri militants in Kashmir—have given their lives and taken the lives of others in pursuit of their dream of a nation separate and distinct from India. The Sikh extremists of the 1980s also hoped to form their own nation-state. In fact, even the Dravidian movement for many years formally upheld a right to carve a separate nation out of India. (It was only in 1963, and as a result of the jingoism unleashed by China’s war with India, that this demand was dropped from the DMK’s manifesto.)

This variety of regionalism also has a name: we call it secessionism. It is even less legitimate than parochialism, and far more costly. Some sixty thousand lives have been lost in Kashmir, and several thousand lives apiece in Nagaland since the 1950s and in Punjab in the 1980s and 1990s. Happily, the Sikhs have once more become an integral and invaluable part of the nation. So too the Mizos, who once fought for a separate country but after 1986 made their peace with the Republic of India.

Thus, regionalism in India has come in three varieties—regionalism properly so called, parochialism, and secessionism. The odd and possibly unique thing about ULFA is that it has simultaneously partaken of all varieties of regionalism. That is why the common people of Assam have never turned completely against the militants, for the sentiment of being left out, of being discriminated against, is pervasive among them too. They may not agree with ULFA’s wish to forge a separate nation, or approve of its killings of migrant labourers, but they yet feel that their state has been treated with contempt and condescension by the rest of India. So too with Nagaland and Kashmir, the two other states where regionalism has been both violent as well as intractable, refusing to arrive at a compact with the Union of India.

## **BASTAR THEN AND NOW**

At about the time of the Battle of Britain, an Englishman of combatant age made a new home with his new wife in a then very remote, and very forested, princely state named Bastar. The man was Verrier Elwin, a brilliant Oxford scholar who had joined the Church and then left it, apprenticed himself to Gandhi and then left him, finally settling on the wandering life of a freelance anthropologist. His wife was a Raj Gond named Kosi; much younger than Elwin and without his academic distinction, she yet matched him in strength and independence of character.

Between 1932 and 1940 Elwin was based in the Mandla district of the Central Provinces. In those years he wrote fine books on the Baigas, the Agarias, and the Gonds, as well as two novels with tribal themes and characters. He moved to Bastar in the autumn of 1940 in search of new tribes to write about. Kosi and he built themselves a home overlooking the spectacular Chitrakot Falls on the Indravati river. Over the next three years, they spent the winter months roaming around Bastar, talking to Gonds, Murias, Marias, Koyas, Kalhars and other communities of the State. In the hot weather and monsoon, they mostly stayed at home, where Elwin wrote on a desk that faced the Chitrakot falls themselves.

Recently, while in the British Library in London, I came across a copy of Elwin's 'Journal of a Tour in Southern Maria Country, November 1941 to March 1942.' Several entries speak of the beauty of the countryside, with villages 'surrounded by hills with yellow fields of sirson [mustard] in the foreground and forest everywhere'. The anthropologist found the humans no less enchanting. In a village named Kaklur he attended a tribal dance held in a 'most romantic spot'. The boys were attractively dressed, with 'tassels of red woollen cowries' on their topsis, while the girls were 'especially beautiful and graceful in their movements'. Afterwards, the Elwins and their hosts drank leaf cups of landa, 'one of the most potent drinks known to mankind', which tasted 'like liquid dynamite', yet filled one 'with a spirit of universal benevolence'.

Elwin found the tribals of Bastar 'gentle, friendly, with no desire for property or power'. They were, he wrote to his mother in London, in striking contrast to the warring Europeans. The life led by the Bastar adivasis was 'a great lesson to the world at this time. So long as men cling to the desire of empire and wealth such catastrophes as the present one [i.e., World War Two] are certain to occur'.

This past May, I visited Bastar sixty-five years after Elwin had been there. The old princely state has now been divided into three districts—Bastar, Dantewara, and Kanker. It was in the Dantewara region that Elwin made his tour of 1941-2. I passed through some of the same villages as he had—such as Gidam, Kotru, Bijapur and Bhairamgarh. The countryside was still exquisitely beautiful, the fields interspersed with trees of sal and jackfruit and wild mango, and densely forested hills in the background. Even in mid-summer, the Indravati is a very beautiful

river. And the bird life was very rich indeed—the Brain Fever Bird calling overhead, orioles in the trees, larks and warblers on the ground.

What had changed was the fate and state of the tribals. In fifty years of being part of the Union of India, the Bastar adivasi had seen the new sarkar mostly in the role of an exploiter—as forest officials who denied them entry to the forest, police officials who demanded bribes, and state-supported contractors who paid less than the minimum wage. Nor had the ‘fruits of development’ reached them—like other tribal districts, these too had far less than their fair share of functioning schools and properly staffed hospitals.

The misdeeds of the Government of India had created an opening for Maoist revolutionaries to move into. For the past decade they have been very active in Dantewara district, mobilizing villagers to demand higher wages and freer access to forests. However, such mobilization was invariably accompanied by armed action. Policemen, forest officials, and contractors were attacked and killed, sometimes brutally. So were village leaders deemed to be unsympathetic to the revolutionaries.

Unable or unwilling to meet the Maoist challenge by conventional means, the politicians of Chattisgarh—in which State Bastar now falls—instead set up a vigilante group to combat them. Young tribals were induced by the offer of a gun and a monthly stipend to fight the Maoists. Other villagers were forced to leave their homes and fields and shift to camps by the roadside. The Maoists, meanwhile, responded with retaliatory attacks of their own. In the past year alone, several hundred tribals have been killed in the conflict. And as many as forty thousand have been displaced.

Verrier Elwin found the Bastar tribals at peace, but now they are at war—with one another. He wrote of the Maria of Dantewara that they were ‘communistic people’, who ‘still have a great deal of village solidarity’. Now each village is split down the middle, clan pitted against clan, family against family. Had Elwin seen Bastar today he would have wept. I know I did.

### **CHOLBÉ NA!**

In *Marginal Men*, his fine history of refugee politics, Prafulla Chakrabarti recounts how Kolkata acquired its by now well founded reputation as a city of protests and protesters. To demand fair compensation and citizenship rights, writes Chakrabati, the leaders of the movement aimed to throw ‘regimented bands of refugees in the streets of Calcutta and to maintain a relentless pressure on the Government.... Processions, demonstrations and meetings, traffic jams, brickbats and teargas shells and [police] lathis coming down in showers, burning tramcars and buses, and occasional firings—these became the hallmark of the city’.



Among all the communities in India, the Bengalis have—at least in modern times—been the least quiescent. Washington once witnessed a ‘Million Man March’, but in the last half-century Kolkata has played host to a million marches. Some of these—as in the great rally against the Pokharan blasts in the summer of 1998—had several hundred thousand participants. Others have been more modest in size, but no less intense in an emotional sense. Day in and day out, some Bengali group or the other is to be found on the streets of their capital city, protesting against something or the other.

Indians from elsewhere have tended to be cynical of the Bengali capacity for protest. It has been pointed out that most of the bombs thrown by the much-extolled revolutionaries of the early 20th century missed their target—or hit the wrong one. More recent rebels have been chastised for being negativist, interested only in stopping rather than getting things done. And it is not unknown for a young radical to become a middle-aged reactionary. As a Gujarati economist once claimed to me, all the Bengalis he knew had written revolutionary poetry or marched for the Party when under twenty, and worked for the World Bank or in a prosperous American university when over forty.

Truth be told, by now even some—or perhaps many—Bengalis have become fed up of the ‘Cholbé Na’ attitude of their fellows. They include entrepreneurs who want to squeeze twelve hours of labour out of their workforce, but also ordinary folk who cannot go about their daily business because of the never ending cycle of ‘processions, demonstrations and meetings, [and] traffic jams’. The collective sentiments of these protestors against protest were captured in the judgement of the Kolkata High Court urging the state to be more selective in permitting bandhs that disrupted the life of the city. Likewise, the West Bengal Chief Minister’s insistence that trade unions shall not be allowed in the key software sector is based on the recognition that a wide swathe of Bengali opinion wants to put the past of endless (or mindless) protest behind it.

As a half-honorary Bengali, I have profoundly ambivalent feelings about the Bengali love of protest myself. At its best, it stokes our moral conscience, reminding us of those Indians who continue to be disadvantaged or discriminated against. At its worst, it is simply a species of voyeurism, designed to deflect attention away from substantive issues towards the personality of the protestor. That said, I have no ambivalence at all about the protests by two Bengalis showcased on the front page of The Telegraph exactly a week ago today. Since that day’s newspaper has probably been consigned by readers to the rubbish-heap, let me refresh their memory. The story I am referring to was headlined: ‘IIT Professors Denounce Modi: Two Women Protest [Gujarat] CM Presence in Chennai Programme’.

A year or two ago, this newspaper invited Narendra Modi to be a featured speaker in its annual debate. The speech Modi was delivering in Chennai was part of a further ‘mainstreaming’ of his image, part of the somewhat successful attempt to make the English-speaking middle-class forget his role in the riots of 2002 by re-presenting himself as an efficient administrator and engineer of economic growth. I forget what the title of The Telegraph debate was, but the IIT

Chennai meeting—hosted by the foundation named for and started by the eminent scientist M. S. Swaminathan—was intended to further a technical mission to make ‘Every Village a Knowledge Centre’. Before Modi could speak, two women went up to the stage and held up a placard which read: ‘Mr Modi, We Disapprove’. Later, they told a reporter that ‘we came to protest his Government’s policies. He could not stop the Gujarat communal riots, his handling of the Narmada dam issue is deplorable, and recently he stopped the screening of the Hindi film Fanaa’.

The field of Bengali protest is a very crowded one, in which this most recent entrant stands out. For one thing, where most protesters are young, semi-educated and semi-employed or unemployed men, these were young, highly educated women in reasonably well-paying jobs. For another, the theatre of their protest was not a public street but the air-conditioned auditorium of a prestigious academic institution. It is also noteworthy that they were scientists, from a tribe that, in India at any rate, has tended to be studiously apolitical. One would expect the students of New Delhi’s Jawaharlal Nehru University to protest against the entry of Modi into their campus; so would Modi, which is one reason why he has never been there. But who would have thought that this would happen in an IIT, that the protestors would be women, and that they would be Professors to boot?

I believe it was mistaken of The Telegraph to have invited Narendra Modi to speak in their annual debate. I also believe that what Enakshi Bhattacharya and Nandita Dasgupta did at Chennai last week was salutary. It was also very brave—for unlike the typical left-wing protestor, they could not seek the anonymity of the crowd, and had much to lose—namely, a career that was hard won as well as highly prized.

As the elected Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi has a right to be present at meetings organized by the Union Government or public sector institutions. However, when it comes to meetings hosted by private or autonomous institutions, an invitation to Modi is a privilege, to be gifted or withdrawn as per the courtesy of the host. These have to judge not just his office, but also his record in office. And that includes not just his collusion in—some would say active sponsorship of—the riots of 2002, but also his continuing attempts to stifle the free expression of opinion in his State, as in the last illustration offered by the two IIT ladies—the shocking ban on the film Fanaa, enforced because one of its actors thinks that those displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Dam should be decently rehabilitated.

Governments can be promiscuous when dealing with politicians, but those whose profession is the search for truth should be more discriminating. The discrimination must be consistent; politicians who suppress free expression and intimidate citizens should be shunned regardless of their ideology. If it was right for those two brave ladies to protest Modi speaking at the IIT, it would be wrong for all present to acquiesce if, for example, Fidel Castro was invited to speak at the JNU.

Postscript: The issue of The Telegraph that featured the IIT protest also carried Khushwant Singh's column, with this peculiarly resonant poem: 'There are Fascists/Pretending to be Humanitarians/Like Cannibals on a Health Kick/Eating only Vegetables'.

## CONSCIENCE OF THE NATION

There are basically two kinds of autobiographies. The first kind lays bare the individual self, speaking in detail—sometimes too much detail—about the autobiographer's life, loves, conquests and failures. The second kind seeks to subordinate the life to the times, using individual experience to illuminate wider social trends and processes. In the Indian context, Gandhi's autobiography might easily be identified as being of the first type; Nehru's autobiography, as being of the second. (In fact, most self-testimonies fall into one or the other category; rare is the work that successfully straddles or combines both.)

I have recently been reading the autobiography of Victor Navasky, the long-time editor and now publisher of the American radical weekly, The Nation. Entitled *A Matter of Opinion*, the book consistently privileges the public over the personal. Navasky's wife and children make only fleeting appearances. The focus, squarely, is on impersonal events, as they unfolded in the life of the nation and, indeed, in the career of The Nation.

The Nation was founded in 1865 as an abolitionist paper, and played a vanguard role in the struggle against slavery in the United States. The magazine's founding editor, E. L. Godkin, said that it 'was not to be a party paper', for 'too close identification with a factional or partisan cause was bad journalism as well as bad policy'. Godkin added that while the paper would 'devote a good deal of attention to the social and political condition of the blacks [in] the South', it would not degenerate into a 'mere canting organ of the radical wing'. His ultimate aim was to produce a paper which might not make monetary profit, but 'whose influence on those who read it, and on the country's papers, would be enlightening, elevating, and refining'.

Among later Nation editors was Freda Kirchwey, perhaps the first woman anywhere to edit a political weekly of import. She joined the journal shortly after the First World War, and ran it during the Second, when it played a critical part in uncovering the horrors of the Holocaust. Kirchwey, writes Navasky, was 'a leader on many issues—sexual freedom, birth control, democracy vs. Fascism and Nazism, the Spanish Civil War, collective security, refugees, McCarthyism and censorship, the peaceful use of atomic energy, and Zionism'.

Reading Navasky's book, I wished there was a similar account of India's longest-running radical weekly, the Economic and Political Weekly. Many who read it—and all who write for it—regard the 'EPW' as this nation's conscience. It began life in 1949 as the Economic Weekly, adding the 'Political' seventeen years later. Its founder-editor, Sachin Chaudhuri, was a bhadralok of catholic tastes who was too busy enjoying his life to write about it. His successor, the legendary

Krishna Raj, had the opposite problem. He was a consistently self-effacing man, who would have regarded the genre of autobiography as an unnecessary form of self-advertisement. Perhaps some future historian will step into the breach, to trace the life of the Republic of India through the career of the EPW.

There are, it appears, some telling similarities between *The Nation* and the *Economic and Political Weekly*. For one, both are appallingly bad looking. The well loved columnist Calvin Trillin said of the American weekly that it was ‘probably the only magazine in the country if you make a Xerox of it, the Xerox looks a lot better than the original’. More substantively, they have a similar philosophy or credo, this, in Navasky’s words, being ‘to question the conventional wisdom, to be suspicious of all orthodoxies, to provide a home for dissent and dissenters, and to be corny about it, to hold forth a vision of a better world’.

A great *Nation* editor, Carey McWilliams, said that his journal differed from *Time* and *Newsweek* in exploring, in depth, the underlying meaning and import of the major events of the day. Newsmagazines are mostly written by a staff of experienced and full-time reporters. On the other hand, opinion journals draw much more on freelance contributors and university scholars. As the historian Christopher Lasch pointed out, with the onset of television and the dumbing down of the mass media, these journals had become ‘the only surviving media in which scholars can talk to each other. They give the intellectual community what little unity and coherence it retains’. That is true of *The Nation*; and even more so, one thinks, of the EPW.

There is another way in which the profitable glossy is to be distinguished from the poorly circulated journal of opinion. In the words of the critic Dwight Macdonald, ‘a “little magazine” is often more intensively read (and circulated) than the big commercial magazines, being a more individual expression and so appealing with a special force to individuals of like minds’. These journals are to be judged not by the bottom-line, but by their (often considerable) impact on shaping public policy and public debate and, beyond that even, by the love and loyalty of their readers.

## **A MANAGED MEDIA**

Being an old-fashioned kind of guy, brought up in an old-fashioned sort of home, I came to believe that the duties of a newspaper were to inform, educate, and entertain. It was about a decade ago that I first learnt that, for large sections of the English-language media, these three duties had been superseded by or subordinated to a fourth—the duty to titilate.

It happened this way. A man I knew slightly but admired a great deal had died. His name was Krishnaswami Swaminathan, and he had three careers. The first was as an inspirational teacher of English literature at Presidency College, Madras. The second was as the editor of the *Sunday Standard*, as the highly regarded weekend edition of the *Indian Express* was then known. The

third was as the Chief Editor of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, based in New Delhi. It was in 1958 that Swaminathan assumed this post, after the first editor had died and the second decided to take up a Governorship instead. When he began the job a mere two volumes had appeared; when he left, thirty years later, a further ninety-eight had been published. His accomplishment was both mammoth as well as meticulous; for thousands of letters had to be deciphered, and hundreds of speeches dated and validated. References and cross-references had to be provided, and indexes prepared for individual volumes as well as for the series as a whole. Luckily, Swaminathan had a dedicated team working with him; still, the main job was his, and he executed it superbly.

When Swaminathan died, in 1994, I was living in New Delhi. I knew that his career as a teacher and journalist would not command much attention in that city, but I had hoped that his work on Gandhi's collected works would. I was mistaken. No Delhi daily would carry an obituary of him, despite my entreaties and those of the distinguished scholar Rajmohan Gandhi. This silence regarding Swaminathan was all the more galling because these same papers had just carried multiple obituaries of a fashion designer whose contributions to India were a fraction of the teacher-editor's. However, the fashion designer was young, he was glamorous, and he had died an unnatural death, of Aids—reasons enough for the Delhi newspapers to devote dozens of column inches to him while failing to note the death of a far greater Indian.

I was reminded of my failure to have K. Swaminathan honoured in Delhi while watching the coverage of the shooting and subsequent death of the BJP leader Pramod Mahajan. On the day he was shot, I switched on the TV, where a senior reporter, when asked to describe the incident, spoke instead of his personal grief and the closeness of his ties to the Mahajan family. Through the long week that the politician hovered between life and death, the media—printed as well as electronic—focused with a fascinated obsession on the stream of rich and famous visitors who flocked to the hospital. After Mahajan died, the anchors on television waxed lyrical in their tributes. On one channel I heard him being described as a man of 'kinetic energy', on another as 'one of the few politicians with a modern mind'.

By the standards of Indian politics Mahajan was young—he had achieved high office when he was still short of fifty. He was, if not exactly glamorous himself, on first-name terms with major film-stars and corporate titans. And he died a bloody death—at the hands of his own brother. These factors go some way in explaining the hours spent on him on television and the pages on him in print.

When writing or speaking of the lately deceased one can follow one of two models. The first is contained in the old Latin saying, *de mortuis nil nisi bonum*, speak only good of the dead. The second is Voltaire's injunction that while we may flatter the living, the dead deserve nothing but the truth. While Indians in general tend to follow the former, one would expect (or at least hope) that professional journalists would take heed of the latter. Certainly, the decorum imposed by death precludes a brutal frankness. One did not expect the journalists covering Mahajan's

passing to describe him as, shall we say, a fixer. Still, it was striking that, first, the praise was so effusive, and second, that it was generalized rather than specific. What modern policies did this politician have to offer the Indian public? Or was being a habitué of five-star hotels enough to qualify as being ‘modern’? One knew of Mahajan’s abilities as a networker and fund-raiser, but in which concrete ways had his ‘kinetic energy’ helped the people of India? Instead of substantive answers to these questions, all one got by way of specifics was, once again, anecdotes of this or that journalist’s intimacy with the departed politician.

Being an old-fashioned kind of guy, I could not but compare the media’s treatment of Pramod Mahajan’s demise with the reaction to the death some years ago of another senior Indian politician, C. Subramaniam. Now ‘CS’ was a leader of whom it could truly be said that he had a modern mind. And his achievements were real. It was he who reformed the system of agricultural science, to make it an effective handmaiden in the Green Revolution that in turn made India self-sufficient in food and thus also independent of Western pressure and influence. After he retired from public life, CS worked tirelessly (if in the end, unsuccessfully) to reform the electoral system, hoping to free it of money power and muscle power.

C. Subramaniam died a natural death, of old age. That said, the neglect of his life and work by the press was shameful in the extreme. The only decent obituary appeared, ironically, in the London Economist, which saw, more clearly than our own newspapers, what this Indian had done for his country. A foreign paper understood that CS was a man of real distinction and achievement. Our papers knew only that at the moment when Subramaniam died, he was not a man of wealth, power, or celebrity.

Pramod Mahajan himself claimed that while in the early stages of his career, a politician needed the media, once he had achieved power it was the media which needed him more. His own career certainly exemplified this. While he began by cultivating journalists, in the end it was journalists who were cultivating him. Of course, his case was by no means exceptional. In Delhi, the closeness of journalists to politicians is both ubiquitous and legendary. Editors and columnists are flattered into believing that because of their proximity to power they somehow enjoy and exercise power, too.

To be a journalist, and yet successfully escape the corruptions of the Indian press today, one needs one of two attributes. It helps if one is old enough to remember and be influenced by a time when politicians were public-spirited, and journalists themselves independent-minded. In Delhi itself live two of my journalistic heroes, B. G. Verghese and Ajit Bhattacharjea. Both are utterly honest, non-partisan, and interested in the world beyond the hotels and offices of the capital. Both, however, are close to eighty years of age.

As for the other escape route, I must declare an interest—I am a Tamil who grew up, in an intellectual sense, in Bengal, while the two periodicals I regularly write for are printed in Kolkata

and Chennai respectively. That said, it does seem that newspapers published in cities distant from Delhi have succumbed somewhat less to the seductions of power or the cult of celebrity.

## **THE SOCIOLOGY OF RESERVATION**

The announcement that reservation for OBCs is to be extended to IITs and IIMs has provoked much debate in the press. Critics say the move will undermine the functioning of these institutions by devaluing the principle of merit. Cynics add that the announcement was a consequence of the HRD Minister's wish to outstage and embarrass the Prime Minister. On the other side, there are those who see the extension of reservation as both necessary and overdue. The upper castes, they say, have dominated these institutions, and it is time they shared their privileges with the socially disadvantaged.

As is not uncommon in India, the debate has generated more heat than light. Those who oppose the move dismiss its supporters as 'populists'. They, in turn, are charged with being 'elitists'. This article seeks to move beyond the polemics to analyse the issue in its wider social and historical context. What is the logic of reservation? And why does reservation find such favour among the political class?

To answer these questions, we need to go back to August 1990, when Prime Minister V. P. Singh announced that 27% of all Central Government jobs would henceforth be reserved for OBCs. Mr Singh was here endorsing and implementing the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, constituted in 1978, and which submitted its report two years later. This Commission argued that caste was still the main indicator of 'backwardness'. It identified, on the basis of state surveys, as many as 3743 specific castes which were still 'backward'. These collectively constituted in excess of 50% of the Indian population. Yet these castes were very poorly represented in the administration, especially at the higher levels. By the Commission's calculations, the OBCs filled only 12.55% of all posts in the Central Government, and a mere 4.83% of Class I jobs.

To redress this anomaly the Mandal Commission recommended that 27% of all posts in the Central Government be reserved for individuals from these castes, to add to the 22.5% already set apart for Scheduled Castes and Tribes. For 'we must recognise', said the Commission, 'that an essential part of the battle against social backwardness is to be fought in the minds of the backward people. In India Government service has always been looked upon as a symbol of prestige and power. By increasing the representation of OBCs in Government services, we give them an immediate feeling of participation in the governance of this country. When a backward caste candidate becomes a Collector or Superintendent of Police, the material benefits accruing from his position are limited to the members of his family only. But the psychological spin off of this phenomenon is tremendous; the entire community of that backward class candidate feels elevated. Even when no tangible benefits flow to the community at large, the feeling that now it has its "own man" in the "corridors of power" acts as [a] morale booster.'

The most acute assessment of the Mandal Commission came from the pen of the sociologist André Beteille. He argued that reservation for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (which was already in existence) was undeniably motivated by the imperatives of social justice. For centuries, these communities had been stigmatized, discriminated against, and condescended to. The move to reserve 22.5% of government jobs for them was an acknowledgement of the need to redress a historical injustice. On the other hand, reservation for OBCs was motivated by the imperatives of power. These castes had benefited substantially from the agrarian reforms undertaken after Independence. Once tenants-at-will, they had now become (sometimes very substantial) owner-cultivators themselves. At the same time, since they were also very numerous they had become influential in electoral politics. Through the 1960s and 1970s, more and more OBCs became legislators and parliamentarians, State Ministers and Chief Ministers, and Union Ministers.

Economically and politically, the real beneficiaries of Indian democracy had been peasant castes such as Jats, Yadavs, Gujars and Kurmis in the northern states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Haryana; Marathas in Maharashtra; Vellalas and Gounders in Tamil Nadu; Reddys and Kammas in Andhra Pradesh; and Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka. These castes now had more land; and a greater presence in political parties and in the legislatures. What they lacked was administrative power. By virtue of the privileges granted them by the Constitution, the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes had begun entering government service. Lacking a tradition of education, the OBCs were still kept out. This deficiency was sought to be overcome by reserving a percentage of state jobs for them.

That, in sum, was the logic of the original Mandal Commission. The recent extension of reservation to elite educational institutions is—the word is inescapable—a logical extension. For in the recent, impressive gains made by the Indian economy the OBCs have not benefited proportionately. Upper castes—that is, Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas—constitute less than 20% of the Indian population. Yet they claim perhaps 80% of the jobs in the new economy, in sectors such as software, biotechnology, and hotel management.

In the popular mind, the IITs and the IIMs are something of a passport to the new economy. Entry into one or the other is a virtual guarantee of a handsomely paid job. The Brahmins and Banias crowd into these institutions because generations of practice and social conditioning have made them adept at passing the examinations required to gain entrance. Scheduled Castes and Tribes already have 22.5% of seats reserved for them. But the OBCs remain at a disadvantage; hence the pressure to reserve seats for them, too. What is crucial here is that the IITs and IIMs are publicly funded institutions; started by the state and kept going by the state. This makes it obligatory for them to honour the Constitutional mandate to promote equality of access and opportunity.



In this respect, 'Mandal II' follows logically upon 'Mandal I'. It is a further extension of OBC power and influence into a sector where it previously had scarcely any presence at all. When Mandal I was endorsed by VP Singh in 1990, there were howls of protest from Communist MPs, who thought 'class' should also take precedence over 'caste'. The Congress President Rajiv Gandhi also came out strongly against the proposal. And the BJP leader L. K. Advani sought to answer Mandal with (the Ram) Mandir. This time, however, the criticisms have been confined to the English language press alone. Across the political spectrum, the proposal has been taken as a fait accompli. For no party dare come out openly against a move that has the support of such a numerous and politically powerful section of the Indian population.

My own personal opinion is that in a deeply divided society such as ours, some form of reservation is indeed necessary. Indians born in castes historically denied access to quality education do need special care and support. However, I believe that in schools, colleges and offices alike, reservation should never exceed 33.3%. I also think that for SCs, STs and OBCs alike, family income should be used to determine eligibility for reservation; that only one generation in a family should be granted the privilege; and that children of Class I officials, MLAs and MPs should not be allowed to avail of it. The first restriction would permit institutions to function more autonomously and efficiently than is the case when fully half of its posts are filled on considerations other than individual merit. The second restriction would allow the benefits of reservation to percolate more widely among the population.

But I am only an ordinary writer, with no political affiliation or influence. What I (or my readers) think hardly matters. The principle of reservation is written into the very logic of Indian politics and Indian democracy. In dismissing a petition filed against the Mandal Commission, the Supreme Court imposed a limit of 50% for reserved jobs and posts. I myself think this is excessive; that one in three would work much better than one in two. Others might argue that we should thank the judges for their small mercies—for had they not specified a figure, there might have been no limit at all.

## **THE POLITICS OF PERSONALITY**

In her early years as Congress President, Sonia Gandhi was treated as a political lightweight, by her opponents and independent commentators alike. Her public persona exuded diffidence. She spoke English inadequately. Her Hindi was worse. Her command of both languages was made more imperfect by the thick Italian accent in which the words were couched (and often obscured). However, even if the role of orator never quite became her, over time she became more assured on the podium. More to the point, the party under her leadership and by her canvassing began to win assembly elections. At one stage, while the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance was in power in New Delhi, the Congress controlled as many as fifteen State Governments.

From the year 2001 or thereabouts the BJP began taking Sonia Gandhi seriously. As the General Elections approached the attacks on her became more shrill. The most vicious personal abuse came, naturally, from the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi. He claimed that if the Congress won it would bring about 'Rome Raj'. However, the language used by other BJP leaders to describe the Congress President was not always parliamentary either. Pramod Mahajan, Arun Jaitley, Sushma Swaraj, L. K. Advani—they all competed with one another in casting aspersions on Mrs Gandhi's character. (Atal Behari Vajpayee, alone, did not join the fray.)

The BJP's attacks on Sonia Gandhi showed the Hindu mind at its most bigoted. Rarely did they take up for critical examination the statements on public policy of the Congress President. Rather, they insinuated that since she was a woman, a widow, a Christian, and foreign-born, she was not worthy to live in India, still less contribute to its politics. To her credit, Mrs Gandhi did not answer in kind. She aimed her own criticisms at the policies of the BJP-led Government, not at the personal character of its leaders. This strategy was rewarded, and vindicated, by the victory of the United Progressive Alliance in the elections of 2004.

Recent events indicate, however, that the Congress President is succumbing to the dangerous game of focusing on personalities rather than policies. I refer to her recent resignation from Parliament, which, in my view, is a farcical reprise of her brave and much-applauded refusal to accept the office of Prime Minister in 2004. Some commentators have termed the resignation a 'drama'. However, the Hindi language offers a much better and more pointed word, namely, 'natak'.

The debate in Parliament, and outside it, had raised serious issues about what does and does not constitute an 'office of profit'. Rather than discuss these openly, and on their merits, the Government sought to adjourn Parliament and pass an Ordinance that aimed at protecting the Congress President. When the sleight-of-hand provoked protest, Sonia Gandhi sought likewise to duck the debate by announcing her resignation. Her partymates have represented this as a call of conscience, a much needed infusion of morality in a generally immoral politics. However, the natak is better understood as an attempt to substitute, for the dispassionate discussion of policy, the sentimental and somewhat hysterical celebration of personality.

In this attempt to personalize issues of policy, the Congress President departs from the traditions of her predecessor Jawaharlal Nehru. A Canadian diplomat once wrote of Nehru that 'there is no one since Napoleon who has played both so large a role in the history of his country and has also held the sort of place which Nehru holds in the hearts and minds of his countrymen. For the people of India, he is George Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt and Eisenhower rolled into one'. In other words, Nehru enjoyed the kind of elevated status that Sonia Gandhi cannot even pretend to aspire to. Yet, in his own politics, Nehru never focused on himself, on his character or his alleged indispensability to party and nation. He fought and won elections, and won and lost debates in Parliament, on such impersonal issues as secularism, socialism, non-alignment, and

economic development, these discussed on their own merits, not with regard to the biodata of the speaker.

To their credit, Nehru's opponents were on the same wave-length as he. Whether it be Shyama Prasad Mookerjee and his Jana Sangh, or Hiren Mukherjee and his Communist Party, or Minoo Masani and his Swatantra Party, these leaders and parties sought to present themselves as political alternatives to the ruling Congress. Although they savaged Nehru's policies they never spoke disparagingly of his personality.

The one exception to this general trend was that maverick socialist Ram Manohar Lohia. His distaste for Jawaharlal Nehru was as much personal as it was political. Later, he refined his penchant for character assassination at the expense of the third Prime Minister of India, whom he dismissed as a ghungi gudiya (dumb doll).

Lohia died in 1967, but his legacy was carried on and corroded by the 'anti-Congressism' of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Before the 1971 elections, the Opposition sought to unite under the campaign slogan of 'Indira Hatao!' The Prime Minister answered that her own party stood for 'Garibi Hatao!' It was an inspired coinage, if only because it went beyond personalities to substantive issues of policy. However, after her victory in the 1971 elections, Mrs Indira Gandhi increasingly came to identify the nation's future with her own. A creeping authoritarianism became rampant with the promulgation of the Emergency in June 1975, an act designed exclusively to protect the Prime Minister after an adverse judgement against her in the Allahabad High Court.

Her actions from 1972 to 1977 confirmed the belief of the Congress party that 'Indira is India, and India is Indira'. This personalizing of politics was principally responsible for the Congress's defeat in the elections of 1977. Three years later the party returned to power. Now the eminent political scientist Basheerudin Ahmad wrote advising the Prime Minister to remake the party as 'the palpably real institution that the Congress was under Nehru'. For it was 'essential that a sharing of power replace its personalisation, that a leadership drawing its power from the grassroots rather than above should be allowed to emerge'. Indira Gandhi's 'restored charisma', said Professor Ahmad, could then be used 'in the service of shoring-up and reinforcing the institutions of an open polity before it dissipates again as in the past'.

The sentiments were at once noble and naïve. For it was not just the Congress party that Indira Gandhi believed she embodied, but the Indian Nation itself. In May 1980 she told a visiting journalist of how 'for many long years I have been the target of attack [from] individual, groups and parties', these either 'Hindu and Muslim fanatics', or 'old feudal interests', or 'sympathetic to foreign ideologies'. Where she stood 'for India's unfettered independence of action, self-reliance and economic strength...', those 'who are against self-reliance, or secularism or socialism find some reason or other to malign me'. Ram Manohar Lohia was long dead, but here was Indira Gandhi accepting his invitation to identify the fate of India with her own personality.

‘Whatever Indira stands for is bad because she stands for them’, claimed Lohia and his successors. ‘Whatever Indira stands for is good because she stands for them’, answered the Prime Minister and her followers.

The Congress party, like India itself, is an institution with multiple histories, histories that sometimes contradict and cancel out one other. Although they each were Prime Minister for a decade-and-a-half, and although they were father and daughter, the political styles of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi could not have been more opposed. One submerged his personality to the needs of his party and nation, the other identified the party and nation with her own self. As the most powerful person in the Congress today, and hence also the most powerful Indian now living, Sonia Gandhi has sometimes shown signs of following in the footsteps of the one, at other times in the footsteps of the other. Perhaps the time has come to make an unambiguous choice, to declare a preference to the Indian people.

## **LOVE AND HATE BEFORE THE AGE OF BUSH**

For most of its career as an independent nation, India has not had the happiest relations with the United States. In the words of the historian Denis Kux, these have been two ‘estranged democracies’. The causes of the estrangement were various—America’s enchantment with India’s enemy, Pakistan; India’s affection for America’s enemy, the Soviet Union; the self-righteousness and moral hauteur of opinion makers in both countries.

In these sixty years there have been three short periods when the relations have not been chilly or cold. The first phase ran from 1949, when China became Communist, to 1954, when the United States signed a military pact with Pakistan. In those five years American liberals—led by their Ambassador in New Delhi, Chester Bowles—urged Washington to prop up democratic India as an alternative to a menacingly Communist China. The third phase commenced with President Clinton’s visit to India in 2000, and has lasted up to the present day. It is fair to say that the thaw began with a (in my view very belated) recognition by Washington that it was time to move away from a partisan affiliation with Pakistan towards better ties with India.

I wish in this column to focus on the second and now mostly forgotten phase when relations between New Delhi and Washington looked up rather than down. On that occasion it was we, rather than they, who sought to mend fences. In the winter of 1962 the Indian army was defeated in a border war with China. The humiliation was felt by the country as a whole, for the Chinese swept through thousands of square miles of Indian territory to reach the edge of Assam. That province was theirs for the taking, but, having made their point, Mao’s men declared a unilateral cease-fire and wended their way back home over the Himalaya.

On the 9th of November, after the first wave of Chinese attacks, the American Ambassador of the day, the economist, art collector, and bon vivant John Kenneth Galbraith, was called in to

meet the Indian Prime Minister. A request was made for arms from America. This came at a cost that could never be measured in money alone. For, as Galbraith wrote to President John F. Kennedy, all his life Jawaharlal Nehru had 'sought to avoid being dependent upon the United States and the United Kingdom—most of his personal reluctance to ask (or thank) for aid has been based on this pride.... Now nothing is so important to him, more personally than politically, than to maintain the semblance of this independence. His age no longer allows of readjustment. To a point we can, I feel, be generous on this...'

In the last week of November 1962 the arms began arriving, carried by planes bearing soldiers in uniform. As an American journalist wrote, this meant the 'collapse of his [Nehru's] non alignment policy'. To many Indians those dark blue uniforms carried 'a special meaning', contained in one single word: 'failure'. For the American Ambassador, however, those uniforms spelt the word 'opportunity'. For this might be the beginnings of an entente to contain a Communist power potentially more threatening than Soviet Russia itself.

On the 29th of January 1963, Galbraith wrote Kennedy a secret letter which contained this remarkable passage: 'The Chinese are not quarreling with the Soviets over some academic points of doctrine. They are, one must assume, serious about their revolution. The natural area of expansion is in their part of the world. The only Asian country which really stands in their way is India and pari passu the only Western country that is assuming responsibility is the United States. It seems obvious to me [that] there should be some understanding between the two countries. We should expect to make use of India's political position, geographical position, political power and manpower or anyhow ask.'

It must have been the economist in Galbraith that provoked him to identify China rather than Russia as the greater long-term threat to American interests. Anyhow, in response to the Indian request, Kennedy sanctioned the supply of a million rounds for machine guns, 40,000 land mines, and 100,000 mortar rounds. This fell far short of the Grand Alliance that his Ambassador was recommending; yet it was far in excess of what other Americans thought New Delhi deserved.

A bitter opponent of arms supply to India was Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia, the long-serving Chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee. A crusty old reactionary—doughtily opposed to desegregation and the like—Russell had previously termed India an 'unreliable friend' and called Jawaharlal Nehru a 'demagogue and a hypocrite'. Now he told the Associated Press that he was 'against giving India any of our modern weapons for the principal reason that we would be just giving them to the Chinese Communists. The Indians put on a disgraceful exhibition in permitting themselves to be driven out of what should have been impregnable strongholds in the border mountains. They seem incapable of fighting and if we supply them with weapons they will just fall into the hands of the Communists'. As things stood he was opposed to giving 'one dime of weapons to India'. However, Russell said he might have a re-

think if India's old rulers, the British, were prepared to 'take over the matter of re-organizing and re-training their military forces...'

Russell's remarks were widely reported in the press. While some liberals deplored his stand, he received much support from across Middle America. A correspondent from Wichita, Kansas, thanked the Senator for warning that it was 'very dangerous for the U. S. to make a doormat of itself to a country whose leaders have shown little interest or support to the U. S. except to take our money and aid and then villify us at every turn'. A man from Plantation, Florida, thought that India's troubles were 'of their own consequences and making'; namely, the 'Neutralist Policy' which they followed even while 'the Communists have swallowed millions of people' the world over. An 85 year-old Democrat from South San Gabriel endorsed Russell's 'objection to this country saddling its taxpayers with the upkeep of four hundred million ignorant, starving people of India, whose leaders including Nehru and others are strikingly procommunist and hostile to our form of government...Nehru's so-called neutralism... should teach this nation to let India stew in its own superstitious and ignorant juices'.

From his compatriots, Senator Russell received dozens of letters of congratulation, but (so far as I could tell from a trawl through his archives) only one of dissent. This was written by a Fulbright scholar based in Madras, who argued that it was time to undo the American policy of arming Pakistan while denying aid to India. India, said the scholar, was a 'popular democracy', whereas Pakistan was a military dictatorship which 'exists as a political entity solely on its emotional antagonism to India'. Besides, it was not true that the Indian troops had simply fled. They had fought hard in parts, and had they been better armed, could have held their own. Now, 'India is seeing to the recruitment of more troops; I should think that it would be in our best interests to see that they are properly armed'.

As it happened, the honeymoon between Washington and New Delhi did not last very long. John F. Kennedy was dead within the year, and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, did not share his enthusiasm for democratic India. Even less favourably inclined was Johnson's successor, Richard Nixon. The relationship entered a downward spiral, from which it began to emerge only in the 21st century.

I have presented these historical materials for their intrinsic interest, but in conclusion I may be allowed to point to an interesting paradox. When, in the 1960s, New Delhi and Washington began cosyng up to each other, those most displeased by this were American reactionaries. Forty years later, when there is talk once more of the two countries being 'natural allies', the most vocal dissenters are Indian leftists.

## A DIVIDED CITY

The city I live in has two names, these captured in the title of the first chapter of Janaki Nair's fine recent book on the city's history: Bengaluru/Bangalore. As Nair explains, the first name refers to the older part of the city, which has had a more-or-less continuous existence since the 16th century; the second to the 'cantonment' established by the British three hundred years later. Both names have long been in use, one preferred by the Kannada speakers of the old town, the other by the more polyglot communities of the Cantonment.

Now, however, the mother of all rows has broken out over the State Government's decision to make 'Bengaluru' the city's formal, official name—to be used in government correspondence, in office and residential addresses, by the press, by commercial organizations, and by airlines and airports too. The criticisms of the renaming are various. Some say that since 'Bangalore' is now an international city, internationally known by this name, any change will adversely affect its character, image and economic prospects. Others say that while 'Bangalore' trips easily off the tongue, the new name is clumsy and hard to pronounce. Still others worry that this will initiate a wider process of cultural chauvinism, beginning with streets being renamed after local Kannada heroes, and ending with a call for all non-Kannadigas to leave the city.

The critics are, almost to the last man, residents of the cosmopolitan part of the city. They see the renaming as a shameless act of populism, whereby the State Government seeks to deflect attention from the urgent problems it seems incapable of addressing—such as the appalling condition of the roads, the scarcities of water and power, and the hazards posed by poor sanitation and uncollected garbage.

It is undoubtedly the case that Indian politicians find it far easier to appeal to cultural pride than to effect substantive economic or social change. The Ram Mandir campaign helped no one and hurt many, yet for years on end the politics of one of India's leading parties was determined by it. As Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayawati built Ambedkar statues and consecrated Ambedkar parks; this when the Dalits in whose name these actions were taken would have been better served by decent schools and hospitals, and by employment-generating economic growth.

It is also undoubtedly the case that the coalition government now in power in Karnataka has had a rather undistinguished record. Forget Bangalore and its problems, this government has done precious little for the rural sector, either. The government brings together MLA's from the Congress and the Janata Dal (Secular). The Chief Minister, Dharam Singh, is a Congressman, but it is pretty clear that the coalition's eminence grise, and the power behind the throne, is former Prime Minister H. D. Deve Gowda. Mr Deve Gowda has recently re-positioned himself as a champion of the interests of the common man as distinct from the 'elitist' IT sector which drives much of Bangalore's economy. These claims would have carried more conviction if the Government which he remote-controls had built roads, brought water, or provided reliable

electricity to the urban poor in Bangalore, or indeed to the rural communities who still constitute the bulk of the state's population.

Unable or unwilling to bring about meaningful rural or urban development, the Karnataka Government has taken recourse to this symbolic act of renaming Bangalore. The decision was made now, rather than earlier or later, because this happens to be the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the state. Karnataka was formed on 1st November 1956, by bringing together, in one territorial and administrative unit, Kannada-speaking areas which in colonial times were distributed among four distinct political regimes—the Madras and Bombay Presidencies, and the princely states of Mysore and Hyderabad. It was at a meeting convened by the Chief Minister to discuss how the jubilee might be celebrated, that some Kannada writers made the suggestion that the state's capital should henceforth be known by its proper, that is Kannada, name.

The renaming of Bangalore as Bengaluru may thus be viewed as part of the unfinished business of linguistic nationalism. The act draws upon a deep well of cultural sentiment, or one should perhaps say resentment. For while Bangalore is the capital of a state created for and by Kannada speakers, in the city as a whole Kannada speakers are a minority—less than 30%, according to some estimates. Furthermore, the city's new wealth has been created (and enjoyed) chiefly by people who speak not Kannada but Tamil, Gujarati, Hindi and (perhaps especially) English. This is a city divided as much by culture as by class. In Bangalore, the Kannada speaker feels beleaguered, demographically; and he feels left out, economically.

Those who have supported the city's renaming point to precedent. When we have gotten used to 'Kolkata' and 'Chennai', even to 'Thiruvananthapuram', how long will it take us to unselfconsciously refer to this place as 'Bengaluru'? Those examples are all valid, but the one that most closely approximates the present case is the renaming of 'Bombay' as 'Mumbai'. For even had their cities not been rechristened, Tamilians would have still been dominant in Madras, Bengalis in Calcutta, and Malayalis in Trivandrum. However, in Bombay, as in Bangalore, the speakers of the local language, in a city that is the capital of a state formed expressly to protect speakers of that language, are in a minority as well in a position of relative disadvantage (from the point of view of wealth creation). It was this twin marginalization of the Marathi-speaker that once provided the impetus for the Shiv Sena movement. The question that confronts us is this—will Bengaluru/Bangalore also now witness a popular social movement aimed at, if not driving away the 'outsider', at least at putting him in his place?

The line between cultural assertion and chauvinism is a very thin one. I myself feel that the demand for renaming Bangalore is legitimate, and should be honoured. Calling the city 'Bengaluru' is consistent with history and custom, and it hurts no one. And, as with Mumbai/Bombay, while the official name will now be Bengaluru, the other and equally legitimate name, Bangalore, will continue to be used in popular discourse. However, Kannada activists have at times made demands that are less legitimate. One such was the attempt to place restrictions on theatres in Bangalore showing films in languages other than Kannada. Another is



the push for job reservation in private companies for ‘sons of the soil’. These demands are violative of individual rights as well of the federal principle; they undermine both democracy and national unity.

Curiously enough, in the years since they successfully renamed Bombay ‘Mumbai’, the Shiv Sena has itself experienced a decline in political influence. Did the renaming then take the sting out of Marathi chauvinism? The interpretation is perhaps plausible, and certainly reassuring. With luck, my city’s new old name will successfully satisfy Kannada pride, and act as a brake on its close cousin, Kannada chauvinism.

### **PRIME MINISTERS AND BIG DAMS**

Speaking to the Central Board of Irrigation and Power in November 1958, Jawaharlal Nehru deplored a ‘dangerous outlook developing in India’, which he termed the ‘disease of gigantism’. The ‘idea of doing big undertakings or doing big tasks for the sake of showing that we can do big things’, remarked Nehru, ‘is not a good outlook at all’. For it was ‘the small irrigation projects, the small industries and the small plants for electric power which will change the face of the country, far more than a dozen big projects in half a dozen places’. The Prime Minister drew his audience’s attention to ‘the national upsets, upsets of the people moving out and their rehabilitation and many other things, associated with a big project’. These upheavals would be on a lesser scale in a smaller scheme, enabling the state to ‘get a good deal of what is called public co-operation’.

The speech was entitled ‘Social Aspects of Small and Big Projects’; it is reprinted in a volume of Nehru’s speeches on science and society published by the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in 1988. The volume is obscure; the speech more obscure still. But it deserves to be known, and broadcast. For this was the same Nehru who was an enthusiast for large projects, who once celebrated big dams as the ‘temples’ of modern India.

What made Nehru change his mind? There were no anti-dam movements then, no satyagrahas or dharnas by peasants threatened with displacement. As he grew older, Nehru tended to think more of Mahatma Gandhi; perhaps it was his mentor’s insistence on the rights of the ‘last man’ that prompted his rethink. More likely, it was the evidence of the suffering accumulated over a decade of commissioning and building big dams. Too many people had made too large a sacrifice for what was, in the end, not too great a benefit. Besides, these massive schemes were already generating huge amounts of corruption. As a democrat, Nehru was attentive to the rights of the lowly and vulnerable. As a scientist, he was open to changing his mind in the face of new evidence. Thus it was that, in the evening of his life, this once-great proponent of large dams started contemplating more democratic and more scientific alternatives.

However, Nehru's change of mind came too late to reverse a course already well set. Large dams continued to be planned, and built. From the late seventies, however, scientific reservations about their economic viability were joined to popular movements protesting their destruction of the environment and their violations of human rights. In July 1983, the veteran social worker Muralidhar 'Baba' Amte wrote to the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, urging her to intervene in stopping two dams in central India that would submerge 200, 000 acres of dense forest. These dams would also displace 40, 000 adivasis; although they would be paid monetary compensation, 'nothing can compensate for the wrench they would suffer in leaving their traditional cultural environment...'. In terms strikingly reminiscent of Nehru's 1958 address, Amte argued that 'it might not be necessary to incur the multiple costs and risks in building more dams of gigantic size'. 'A series of small dams', he continued, could 'adequately meet the water and energy needs of the people, including electricity for industry, without degrading the environment'. Thus Amte 'earnestly request[ed]' the Prime Minister 'to intercede on behalf of Man and Nature, and reaffirm the national policy of protecting forest wealth and tribal culture'.

This was the first of a series of letters on the subject written by Baba Amte to Indira Gandhi and, after her death, to her son and successor Rajiv Gandhi. Mrs Gandhi replied, twice. On 30 August 1983 she said that while 'my own views are well known', it was nonetheless 'a very difficult battle'. On July 18th 1984 she wrote that although she was 'most unhappy that development projects displace tribal people from their habitat,... sometimes there is no alternative and we have to go ahead in the larger interest'.

Rajiv Gandhi also replied, twice. A letter of 4 October contained this single sentence: 'I have received your letter of 20 September and have noted the various points contained in it'. The next week he wrote a longer letter, perhaps because an advisor had advised it, and told him about Baba Amte's stature (which, as the brusque tone of the first letter suggests, the Prime Minister was unaware of). This finessed the question in lofty generalities: 'I share your view that the common people of our country are a vast reservoir of strength. Their energy, enthusiasm and innate good sense have to be combined with modern skills... We will go very thoroughly into the environmental and human aspects. We have to be careful about the problems of tribal communities which lose their traditional homelands when such projects are constructed'.

I have quoted statements on large dams by three Prime Ministers. I think it fair to say that each one is characteristic. Rajiv Gandhi appears to have signed his name to a vague and non-committal letter drafted by someone else. Indira Gandhi professed her sympathy with tribals and the environment, but hinted that she was helpless against deeper and darker forces. Nehru's remarks were the most frank and direct. They were also unprompted, the self-correcting thoughts of a man who was a thinker before he was a Prime Minister.

## TWO INCHES OF FOAM

In the long history of Cabinet Government in India, perhaps only a handful of Ministers shall be remembered for having carried out programmes that radically reshaped the lives of their people. As Home Minister between 1947 and 1950, Vallabhbhai Patel integrated the princely states, thus altering the politics and geography of modern India. As Finance Minister between 1991 and 1996, Manmohan Singh dismantled the license-permit-quota-raj, thus altering the economy and society of modern India.

In this very short list also appears the name of Madhu Dandavate. When Dandavate passed away recently, the newspapers noted his stewardship of the Finance Ministry in the National Front Government of the late 1980s. That was a job he did honourably and well, but far more significant (though unmentioned by the obituarists) was his stewardship of the Railway Ministry in the Janata Government of the late 1970s. It was Dandavate who first introduced the computerisation of railway reservations, an innovation that greatly reduced corruption and made life less intolerable for commuters.

Dandavate's second innovation was more far-reaching still. This was to put two inches of foam on what passed for 'reserved sleeper berths' in the second-class sections of trains. Many readers of this column know only these new berths; but many others would remember the bad old ones too. Before 1977 (the year Dandavate became Railway Minister), there was an enormous difference between the first-class, where the berths were padded, and the second-class, where they were made of hard and bare wood. If you were lucky enough to travel up front, you slept well; otherwise you woke up with a painful back and (were it winter) a cold in the head as well.

When introducing the change, Dandavate said that 'what I want to do is not degrade the first class, but elevate the second class'. These were the words of a true socialist, whose socialism consisted not of hot rhetoric against the wealthy but of practical action to help the poor. In the two years that Dandavate was Railway Minister those two inches of foam were in place in the major trunk lines. Once the process was begun it could scarcely be stopped. By the end of the 1980s, all trains of the Indian Railways had these padded berths in their second-class compartments. By now the change has helped hundreds of millions of people. If a social history of the Indian Railways is ever written, it might be divided into two parts, these entitled 'Life before Dandavate' and 'Life after Dandavate'.

Dandavate was a remarkable product of a remarkable political tradition. This was the socialist movement, from whose ranks came some of the most talented, and certainly the most honest, politicians of modern India. Many of the best socialists were from Maharashtra, as for example S. M. Joshi, N. G. Goray, and Dandavate's own wife Pramila, a doughty and most effective fighter for women's rights. Tragically, this is a tradition that is now on its last legs. Some of Dandavate's old comrades predeceased him; others have thrown in their lot with the reactionary

forces of the right. The last lamp still alight is that of Mrinal Gore, still working, serving the poor, in her native Mumbai.

The integrity of these old socialists was legendary; indeed, in this particular case I can testify to it myself. In February 1979, I was in Ahmedabad, visiting a friend at the National Institute of Design. I went to the railway station to buy my return ticket to Delhi; also in the queue, and a few places behind me, was my friend's NID classmate, who happened to be the son of the Railway Minister. This was characteristic, not just of this particular family, but of their political tradition as a whole. The sons and daughters of the Maharashtra socialists never took advantage of their parents' political position; and always followed a career different from theirs.

Twelve years after standing ahead of Uday Dandavate in a railway queue, I met his father for the first and last time. I was at the Delhi airport, waiting for my wife. Her flight was delayed; while I waited, a succession of politicians passed by. A General Election was around the corner, so naturally there was much high-powered traffic to the capital from the mofussil. I saw N. T. Rama Rao and N. D. Tewari come and go, each met by a set of grovelling minions. Then came Dandavate, who was met by no one. He had simply picked up his suitcase from the belt and walked out with it. I stopped him before he got into a bus, stammered some words of praise for his honesty, and wished him well for the elections.

The praise turned out to be a curse. For in those polls Dandavate lost his seat in Rajapur for the first time in twenty years. But by then he had done enough to earn a place of honour in the minds (and backs) of every Indian who had ever taken a second-class sleeper at any time or on any route after the year 1977. Add the numbers up, and one might just conclude that those two inches of foam have brought more succour to more people than any other initiative by an Indian politician.

## **VERDICTS ON PAKISTAN**

In this column I have, from time to time, discussed forecasts about India's future made by political commentators. This time I want to place before you two forecasts made about our great neighbour to the north-west, Pakistan. These verdicts were offered forty years apart, albeit in the same American magazine.

In its issue of February 1959, The Atlantic Monthly carried an unsigned report on the state of Pakistan. General Ayub Khan had recently assumed power via a military coup. What was missing in Pakistan, wrote the correspondent, was 'the politicians. They have been banished from public life and their very name is anathema. Even politics in the abstract has disappeared. People no longer seem interested in debating socialism versus free enterprise or Left versus Right. It is as if these controversies, like the forms of parliamentary democracy, were merely something that was inherited willy-nilly from the West and can now be dispensed with'.

Although the military regime had been in place less than a year, it had, thought the Atlantic reporter, done much good. He saw law and order returning to the countryside, and smugglers and black-marketeers being put in their place. 'Already the underdog in Pakistan' is grateful to the army, he wrote, adding: 'In a poor country... the success of any government is judged by the price of wheat and rice', which, he claimed, had fallen since Ayub took over.

Foreign correspondents are not known to be bashful of generalization, even if these be based on a single, fleeting visit to a single, unrepresentative country. Our man at The Atlantic was no exception. From what he saw—or thought he saw—in Pakistan he offered this general lesson: 'Many of the newly independent countries in Asia and Africa have tried to copy the British parliamentary system. The experiment has failed in the Sudan, Pakistan and Burma, while the system is under great stress in India and Ceylon. The Pakistan experiment [with military rule] will be watched in Asia and Africa with keen interest'.

Such was the conclusion: that Pakistan, and poor, ex-colonial countries in general, were better served by unelected officers in uniform than by elected politicians in mufti. Democracy was a Western import unsuited to the genius and culture of lands outside the West. What this assessment seemed to overlook is that Generals are, after all, trained for the prosecution of war. The Atlantic reporter claimed that 'the peasants [in Pakistan] welcome the change in government because they want peace'. Well, in 1965, Field Marshal (as he now was) Ayub Khan brought them war with India. He retired shortly afterwards, not quite in disgrace but not with much honour either. Six years later the Generals who succeeded him fought another war with India.

The 1971 disaster—which combined military defeat with the break-up of the country—led to a restoration of democracy (of sorts) in Pakistan. Unfortunately, the long period of military rule had severely damaged representative institutions. It did not help that, as a centralizing populist, Z. A. Bhutto also undermined the judiciary and the civil service. In 1977 Bhutto was deposed by a military coup, whose leader, General Zia-ul-Haq, promised fresh elections in six months. He stayed in power for a decade, till his death in an aircrash prompted a return of elected government. This lasted another decade, before the politicians were once more banished by a General, the one who still holds power in Pakistan.

In its issue of September 1999, The Atlantic Monthly carried a report on Pakistan entitled 'The Lawless Frontier'. This report, unlike the earlier one of 1959, was signed, by Robert D. Kaplan, who is something of a travelling specialist on ethnic warfare and the breakdown of nation-states. Kaplan presented a very negative portrayal of Pakistan, of its lawlessness, its ethnic conflicts (Sunni vs. Shia, Mohajir vs. Sindhi, Balochi vs. Punjabi, etc.), its economic disparities, and of the training of jihadis and the cult of Osama bin Laden.

Kaplan quoted a Pakistan intellectual who said: 'We have never defined ourselves in our own right—only in relation to India. That is our tragedy'. The reporter himself thought that Pakistan 'could be a Yugoslavia in the making, but with nuclear weapons'. Like Yugoslavia, Pakistan

reflected an 'accumulation of disorder and irrationality that was so striking'. Kaplan's conclusion was that 'both military and democratic governments in Pakistan have failed, even as India's democracy has gone more than half a century without a coup'.

Kaplan doubtless had not read the very different prognosis of Pakistan (and of its military rulers) offered in his own magazine forty years previously. One must hope that his prediction of Pakistan's disintegration is as far-fetched as the prophecy that Ayub Khan would bring peace and prosperity to that land. What remains striking are the very different assessments of this country, India. In 1959, *The Atlantic* pitied India for having a democracy when it might be better off as a military dictatorship. In 1999, *The Atlantic* thought this very democracy had been India's saving grace.

### **LENINISM VERSUS DEMOCRACY**

In 1977, Left Fronts dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) came to power in the states of West Bengal and Kerala. A year later, the CPM leader B. T. Ranadive wrote a pungent critique of the parliamentary path to socialism. This took the shape of a review of a recent book by the Spanish Communist Santiago Carillo, entitled *Eurocommunism and the State*. In a thirty-page essay in the Marxist monthly, *Social Scientist*, Ranadive attacked Carillo as a renegade, the last in the shameful but alas long line of 'revisionists' who had abandoned the path of revolution in favour of the softer option of reform.

The Indian Communist charged his Spanish comrade with six heresies in particular:

First, Carillo thought that, at least in Western Europe, socialists and communists could now come to power via the ballot box rather than through armed revolution. In Ranadive's paraphrase, 'the central point of Carillo's book is that there is absolutely no need for a revolution in the developed capitalist countries... According to him socialism can be achieved peacefully, without violating any of the rules of bourgeois democracy....'

Second, Carillo claimed that Communist parties did not necessarily possess a monopoly of the truth. According to him, the Spanish Communist Party 'no longer regards itself as the only representative of the working class, of the working people and the forces of culture. It recognises, in theory and practice, that other parties which are socialist in tendency can also be representative of particular sections of the working population...'

Third, Carillo held that private enterprise had a role to play in economic growth, albeit in alliance with the State. As the Spaniard put it, 'the democratic road to socialism presupposes a process of economic transformation different from what we might regard as the classical model. That is to say it presupposes the long-term co-existence of public and private forms of property'.

Fourth, Carillo argued that in the Cold War, the Europeans should keep their distance from the Americans and the Soviets alike. As he wrote, 'our aim is a Europe independent of the USSR and the United States, a Europe of the peoples, orientated towards socialism, in which our country will preserve its own individuality'.

Fifth, Carillo believed that Marx, Engels and Lenin were not infallible, that their views were open to correction and even challenge with the passage of time and the evidence of history.

Sixth, Carillo believed that the Communist Party was not infallible either, that at least in non-political matters individuals should feel free to follow their own conscience. In the Spaniard's formulation, 'outside collective political tasks, each [party] member is master of his own fate, as regards everything affecting his preferences, intellectual or artistic inclinations, and his personal relations'. Then he significantly added: 'In the field of research in the sciences of every kind, including the humanities, different schools may co-exist within [the party] and they should all have the possibility of untrammelled confrontation in its cultural bodies and publications'.

Reading Carillo through the quotes provided by Ranadive, one cannot help but admire his honesty and his vision, his overdue but nonetheless brave recognition that the bloody history of his country (and continent) mandated a radical revision of the Communist idea. But B. T. Ranadive saw it very differently. He spoke with withering contempt of Carillo's faith in those 'miserable parliamentary elections', and with even more disdain of his independence with regard to the Cold War. 'Can any Communist', he fumed, 'put the enemy of mankind, the gendarme of world reaction, American imperialism, on the same footing as Soviet Russia?'

Carillo's argument that other political parties can and should exist, indeed that these parties might even sometimes be right, was seen by Ranadive as tantamount to 'giving a permanent charter of existence to non-Marxist, anti-Marxist and unscientific ideologies'. In fact, it amounted to nothing less than a 'liquidation of the Leninist concept of party'. Further, the encouragement of a diversity of thought outside the sphere of politics was 'the final denigration of the Marxist-Leninist Party in the name of freedom for all its members to profess any opinion they like on any subject'. In contrast to the heterodox Spaniard, Ranadive insisted that 'the Party's outlook and the outlook of its members is determined by their firm allegiance to Marxism-Leninism and must be consistent with it'.

Ranadive's own riposte to the renegade Carillo rested heavily on quotes from Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the Holy Trinity whose works and words must never be questioned, emended, or—Heaven forbid—challenged. The Indian Communist complained that 'Carillo turns a blind eye to Lenin's teachings'; worse, 'a large part of his argument is lifted from bourgeois writers and baiters of Marxism'.

Reading Carillo as conveyed through Ranadive, one notices how akin his views are to those who wrote the Indian Constitution. Parliamentary democracy based on universal adult suffrage, the proliferation of political parties, a mixed economy with space for both public and private

enterprise, a non-aligned and independent foreign policy, the freedom of creative expression—these were the ideals enshrined in the Constitution, and the ideals embraced by Santiago Carillo almost thirty years later.

Ideals, however, which were anathema to a prominent Indian Communist. It is necessary to point out here that in March 1948, it was the self-same B. T. Ranadive who led the Communist Party of India in an insurrection against the infant Indian state, seeking to come to power the Chinese way, through an armed revolution. That line was later abandoned, with the Communists coming overground to fight the General Elections of 1952. In 1957, the undivided CPI came to power in Kerala; ten years later, the CPM won again in that state. Also in 1967, the CPM was part of the ruling coalition in West Bengal; ten years later, it came to power in the state more-or-less on its own.

And yet, these successes could not succeed in reconciling some leading Communists to ‘bourgeois’ democracy. For Ranadive’s critique of Carillo was really a warning to those among his comrades who might likewise think of revising the classical postulates of Marxism-Leninism. It is quite extraordinary, yet also quite in character, that so soon after his party had come to power in three states via the ballot box, did Ranadive choose to let loose this fusillade against parliamentary democracy, the mixed economy, freedom of expression, and non-alignment in foreign policy.

I have resurrected B. T. Ranadive’s views here not simply out of a historian’s interest in the strangeness of the past. For the prejudices he held—and so vigorously articulated—are unfortunately still quite widespread in the CPM today. In practice their ideologues seem somewhat reconciled to parliamentary democracy, but they retain an irrational hostility to private enterprise, are still hostile to intellectual debate and dialogue, and yet cling to a faith in their party’s infallibility.

I have long held that the central paradox of Indian Communism is that its practice is vastly superior to its theory. Communist leaders and activists are probably more intelligent than their counterparts in other parties, and without question more honest. Where other kinds of politicians have eagerly embraced the Page Three culture, many Communists still do mix and mingle with the working people.

This is why it is such a great pity that their often honourable practice is crippled with an archaic and outmoded theory. For if the history of the twentieth century teaches us anything, it is this—that parliamentary democracy is, despite all its faults, superior to totalitarianisms of left and right; and that the market is, despite all its faults, a more efficient and cheaper allocator of economic resources than the state. This history also teaches us a third lesson, one specific to this country—that, despite all their faults, Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar are thinkers more relevant to the practice of politics in India than are Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.



It is, however, the latter quartet whose works are discussed in CPM party workshops, whose portraits adorn the podium at party congresses. From the continuing presence of those hard, unsmiling faces, we may deduce that while in his understanding and appreciation of democracy, the renegade Santiago Carillo may have been thirty years behind the framers of the Indian Constitution, he was still thirty years ahead of his comrades in the Indian Communist movement.

## **BIGOTRY VS. BROADMINDEDNESS**

Can the BJP reconstitute itself as a sober, responsible, right-wing party, a party that respects tradition and order without necessarily advertising itself as 'Hindu'? Put more directly, can it free itself of the RSS and the VHP? Or must it always, in the last instance, be hostage to the beliefs of the Parivar's fundamentalist fringe?

These questions have come to the fore in the aftermath of Mr L. K. Advani's visit to Pakistan, and the controversy sparked by his remarks there about M. A. Jinnah. In truth, these questions have been with us for the past twenty-five years. They come up every so often, are discussed and debated with great intensity, but never properly resolved.

Perhaps a little history will help answer these questions in a somewhat decisive fashion. The Jan Sangh was founded in 1951 by Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee as a modern version of the Hindu Mahasabha. Within two years of founding a new party Dr Mookerjee was dead. One cannot say what would have happened had he lived longer, but his going meant two things: first, the RSS became the power behind the party, providing it with key cadres as well as a core ideology; second, the Jan Sangh found its feet not in Bengal but in North India, in Delhi, Rajasthan, U. P. and M. P. in particular. From very early on, the party was biased in favour of adherents of a certain religion, and also speakers of a certain language. As one of its popular slogans went: 'Hindi, Hindu, Hindustan'. What was it biased against? Principally, the interests and even the existence of India's most important neighbour. The Jan Sangh was pro-Hindu and pro-Hindi, and it was also anti-Pakistan. True, there were some kinds of Indians it did not particularly care for either. For example, the RSS ideologue M. S. Golwalkar identified Muslims, Christians and Communists as three groups whose fidelity to Bharat Mata remained suspect.

Writing in 1968, C. Rajagopalachari remarked that the Jan Sangh 'has quite a few good leaders... What is needed however is a broadmindedness that not just practices toleration but looks upon Mussalmans, Christians, Parsis and others as politically and culturally as good as Hindus'.

Rajaji could have added 'South Indians' to the list of people the Jan Sangh could not bring itself to wholly trust. For in the first three decades of its existence, the party had practically no influence south of the Vindhyas. One might make a partial exception for Karnataka, where a few

intellectuals in Bangalore and Mysore, and the prosperous Brahmin community of the west coast, gravitated towards the party of the Hindu right.

The Jan Sangh might always have remained a regional party, confined by religion and language, had it not been for the Emergency of 1975-7. It was in Mrs Gandhi's prisons that its leaders joined the leaders of other non-Congress parties to form the Janata Party. When the Empress released them and called a General Election, this new party, hastily cobbled together, demolished the Congress in northern India. Notably, one of the reasons for its success was the mass support of poor Muslims, who were among the main victims of the Emergency.

In retrospect, the Jan Sangh had much in common with the other elements of the Janata coalition. The Congress (O), the Swatantra Party, and the Socialists were all, like the Jan Sangh but unlike the Congress of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, keen to limit the influence of the state on the economy, promote democratic decentralization, and align India with the West rather than the Soviets. In theory, these fragments could have buried their divergent histories and forged a common future, based on a common political and economic programme.

If such a fusion did not occur in practice, it was because of a fundamental feature that divided the Jan Sangh from the other Janata fragments—namely, the ideology of the RSS. Whatever their other weaknesses, men such as Morarji Desai and Ravindra Varma (Congress (O)), Piloos Modi (Swatantra), and Madhu Limaye (Socialist), were neither chauvinists nor bigots. They might discriminate between Indians on grounds of political ideology, but never on account of religious faith.

The same could not, however, be reliably said of Atal Behari Vajpayee or L. K. Advani. The Janata Party finally split in September 1979 on the question of 'dual membership'—on whether a party member could also continue to be a member of the RSS. In refusing to give up membership of the Sangh, Vajpayee and Advani were in effect saying they would not disavow an ideology which held that Indian Christians were suspect, and Indian Muslims even more so.

The Jan Sangh was born afresh as the Bharatiya Janata Party. Its performance was poor in the 1980 elections, and disastrous in 1984 (when it won a mere two seats). Then, Rajiv Gandhi's unlocking of the shrine in Ayodhya took the BJP along the low and bloody road to political renewal. Now, atavistic bigotry was married to instrumental politics. The creation of a glorious monument to Lord Ram would, it was hoped, not just bring a sense of pride to Hindus, but also create the mother of all vote-banks—of all Hindus, transcending the divisions of caste, sect, region, and language.

The Ayodhya movement helped the BJP expand its influence, to regions in the south and west where it scarcely had any presence before. But it still could not come to power on its own. Thus, on becoming Prime Minister in 1998 and again in 1999, A. B. Vajpayee sought to give the impression that he was a 'national' rather than a specifically 'Hindu' leader. Some of his

policies—such as the Pakistan peace initiative, and the support to economic reforms—were certainly not to the liking of the fundamentalist fringe in his Parivar.

Still, Vajpayee could not bring himself to actually disavow the RSS. In a speech in New York he said that he was a swayamsevak before he was an Indian. However, the critical test—which he comprehensively failed—was the Gujarat riots of 2002, when he could not bring himself to condemn Narendra Modi, still less to sack him. In fact, he used far harsher words in describing the murder by a mob of 58 Hindus than in describing the state-sponsored pogrom of more than 2000 Muslims. In this he was indeed a true swayamsevak. As Rajaji had pointed out, for the Jan Sanghi the life of a ‘Hindu’ is somehow more valuable than the life of any other kind of Indian.

It is said that, thinking of international opinion, Vajpayee thought of dismissing Narendra Modi’s Government, but quickly resiled, when it became clear that the majority of his partymen were against it. Now, thinking of his own political future—specifically, the prospect of his becoming Prime Minister—L. K. Advani made some remarks in Pakistan that sought to rid his party (and himself in particular) of the taint of communal bigotry. His retreat has been as swift as Vajpayee’s, and as ignominious, with the ‘national debate’ he called for closed by the bosses in Nagpur.

Four times in the past quarter-of-a-century, the leaders of the Jan Sangh/BJP have been given the chance to remake—one might say redeem—themselves. Four times they have not taken it. In 1979, they broke the Janata Party on the orders of the RSS. In 1992, they permitted, indeed encouraged, the destruction of the mosque in Ayodhya, and sat silently during the communal riots that followed. In 2002, the BJP-controlled Government of India did not act when a State Government persecuted its own citizens. Now, in 2005, the BJP President spoke in praise of secularism and Hindu-Muslim harmony; then withdrew his words within a week.

If many Indians have given the BJP the benefit of doubt all these years, it is because (as Rajaji remarked long ago) they do have some very good leaders. Despite their age, Vajpayee and Advani remain among the most intelligent and capable of Indian politicians. But I think it is time we stopped asking the questions posed in the first paragraph of this column. The BJP cannot, will not, rid itself of the bigots and bigotry of the RSS. It cannot, will not, remodel itself as a party that treats all Indians equally regardless of their personal faith.

## **WHERE LEFT MEETS RIGHT**

Earlier this year, I was at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, where I had been asked to give an after-dinner talk to the students. I reached ten minutes before schedule, so my hosts took me for a coffee while the audience was being rustled up. While we drank the coffee, at a modest open-air outlet run by Nescafe, they explained that their forum was wholly ‘non-political’, unlike the other, party-affiliated groups that dotted the campus. To get a sense of

their activities I asked how often they held these meetings. Once a month, they answered. I then asked who the previous speaker was. They named a Marxist economist. And what did she speak on, I enquired? On how multinational outfits such as this one should not be allowed to contaminate the purity of the JNU campus.

I reeled back in shock. The surprise was occasioned in part by the triviality of the topic chosen by my predecessor. I was speaking on 'The Contribution of the Congress Party to the Nurturing and Degrading of India's Democracy', and I had thought that those who had come before me had spoken on similarly grave—not to say boring—subjects. But the surprise was also caused by the topic being so much at odds with the speaker's own biography. Why does your professor oppose this Nescafe outlet, I asked. Because she feels we should encourage indigenous initiatives, they answered. Do you know where her own doctoral degree is from, I asked. They didn't know, so I supplied the answer—the University of Cambridge. When you next meet your professor, I said sarcastically, ask her one question on my behalf—when she travels by plane to international meetings, does she carry a South Indian filter and Coorg coffee power with her, or does she quietly drink the beverage offered her on the flight?

I returned to Bangalore, to find my home town overtaken by a much larger epidemic of xenophobia, orchestrated this time from the Right. An American preacher named Benny Hinn was due to come to deliver a series of open-air sermons. The Sangh Parivar had come out in force to oppose him. The agitation was being led by the state unit President of the BJP, Ananth Kumar. Mr Kumar described Benny Hinn's visit as 'an organized conspiracy to defame and destroy Hinduism'. The ring-leader of the conspiracy, he added, was the Congress President Sonia Gandhi. Unlike the JNU Professor, however, the right-wing loonies were not content with making speeches. They tore down the posters advertising Hinn's sermons, attacked Government offices, held up traffic, and generally harassed the residents of the city.

Indian politics is rich in ironies strange and bizarre, but this must indeed be one of the oddest. Bitter enemies though they might be, the Marxist Left and the Saffron Right are united by what can only be described as an irrational fear of the foreigner. Hinduism must be a very weak religion if it can be destroyed by a few talks delivered by an itinerant American preacher. And the intellectual core of Marxism must be very shallow if it can be undermined by a single coffee shop on the JNU campus.

On this matter, the parallels between the rhetoric of Left and Right are striking indeed. When the NDA Government was in power, S. Gurumurthy of the Swadeshi Jagran Manch and K. S. Sudarshan of the RSS were periodically issuing threats against a Government they otherwise claimed to support. These threats always revolved around foreigners and foreign investment—allow too much of either, said Gurumurthy and Sudarshan, and we shall begin an agitation in the streets. Now, with the UPA Government in power, the likes of Sitaram Yechury and Prakash Karat likewise warn a Government they claim they support that unless they heed their advice on economic affairs they shall be in trouble. The personnel may have changed, and the ideological

cloaking may now come from the Left rather than the Right. But the rhetoric remains more or less the same, to be summed up in three words, ‘Keep Out Foreigners!’.

What explains this shared xenophobia of Left and Right? I can think of two reasons. One has already been alluded to, namely, that the shrillness of rhetoric masks a fundamental insecurity of ideas. There is a deep fear of open debate, of allowing influences and opinions to come from spheres that one cannot control. Besides, it would confuse the cadres.

The second, and to my mind more important reason, stems from the history of Indian nationalism. The Indian freedom movement was a genuinely mass movement—its participants included, at various times and in different proportions, men and women, high castes and low castes, socialists and liberals, Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians, Bengalis, Maharashtrians, Tamils, Punjabis, Hindi speakers, Oriyas... People from all parts of India, and from every linguistic group, participated with enthusiasm in the struggle.

Two ideological formations however had a relationship with the national movement that was problematic and ambivalent at best, and hostile and adversarial at worst. These were the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the forbear of today’s BJP; and the original, undivided Communist Party of India, the forbear of today’s CPM. For long stretches the RSS and CPI stayed aloof from the national movement, choosing instead to build their support base outside its ambit. Occasionally, some RSS members and some Communists would join nationalist demonstrations and campaigns, usually with a view to shaping (or perhaps manipulating) it. And sometimes, the RSS and the CPI found themselves opposing the freedom movement, to this end even making common cause with British imperialism against the party of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru.

Let me now offer this thesis—that because they played such an insignificant part in the social movement which brought India political freedom, the Saffron Right and the Communist Left feel obliged to wear their ‘nationalism’ on their sleeves—to express, with such force and vehemence, their opposition to what they regard as alien and contaminating influences. The RSS shall demonstrate their Indianness by demanding that the preacher Benny Hinn has to ‘Quit India’; the Marxist Professors will demonstrate it by demanding that a small, shabby coffee outlet owned by Nestle must ‘Quit JNU’.

It is, I suggest, their guilt at staying apart from the national movement in the past that motivates the RSS and the CPM to take such hyper-nationalist positions in the present. That history makes their hyper-nationalism somewhat fraudulent. But in the context of the world we live in today, it also makes it hypocritical. Mr Ananth Kumar wants to ban Christian priests from coming to India, but he is quite happy to encourage Hindu priests to preach in the West—and collect money for his cause. And while Nestle might be asked to leave JNU, the Left Front government in West Bengal actively woos foreign direct investment. Indeed, Park Street and Chowringhee are

already aglow with their success in this regard—for of the signs on display, those of foreign firms equal or perhaps even outnumber those of Indian companies. Is there now a possibility that the JNU Professors will march down Park Street at the head of a CPM procession, demanding that the citizens of Kolkata emulate their students by boycotting foreign goods? Somehow, I think not.

## **STUNG BY THE WEST**

Back in the 1850s, Karl Marx wrote a series of essays on the results of British rule in India. These essays were marked by an ambivalence that was uncharacteristic as well as profound. On the one hand, Marx saw that the British had come to the sub-continent to dominate and exploit, objectives that were deeply repugnant to a radical socialist such as himself. On the other hand, the encounter with a progressive, modernizing society might be a wake-up call to a society frozen by feudalism. Thus, Marx argued that while the British had come to India with ‘the vilest of motives’, they yet might be remembered as the ‘unconscious tool of history’. With luck, colonial rule would force a backward, hierarchical society to take aboard such liberating modern values as equality and justice.

I read Marx’s essays years ago, while a student in Kolkata. But I was reminded of them in the aftermath of the denial, by the United States Government, of a visa to the Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi. For while the Americans were motivated by less than noble motives, it is just possible that their act might inspire a long overdue cleansing of Indian democracy.

I have no doubt that the decision to deny Mr Modi entry to the U. S. was inspired not by abstract ideals of justice but by hard-nosed reapolitik. For, outside their own borders, the Americans don’t really care for democracy at all. They have armed and supported a legion of dictators, from Ferdinand Marcos to Pervez Musharraf—and they have also wined them at the White House. Nor do they care, specifically, about the human rights of Muslims. In fact, their best friend in the world is the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, who has the blood of many more Muslims on his hands than does Narendra Modi. But, deep into a damaging war in Iraq, they do care about their image in the region. It is this consideration that most likely lies behind the closing of the door to Mr Modi. By denying a known Muslim-baiter a visa, the Americans hope that they can somewhat redeem their reputation in the Middle East.

The hypocrisy of the Americans has prompted a wave of nationalistic outrage in the Indian press. The pack has been led by Sangh Parivar sympathizers, but some estimable liberal voices have been carried along. Thus, Vir Sanghvi of the Hindustan Times says that while he detests Mr Modi and his variety of communal politics, he was yet indignant that the Americans chose to deny him a visa. ‘Modi may be a mass murderer, but he’s our mass murderer’, writes Mr Sanghvi.

Mr Sanghvi also writes that ‘logic and patriotism don’t always go hand in hand’. I think he meant ‘nationalism’ rather than ‘patriotism’. For a patriot is one who loves his own country, whereas a nationalist is someone who scorns other people’s countries. A nationalist might wish to defend Mr Modi against arrogant Americans; a patriot shall find it impossible to defend him against the Constitution and the Republic of India.

My own hope is that the American rebuff to Mr Modi will make Indians recognize, and attempt to reverse, the continuing degradation of our democratic institutions. Once, the taunts of British colonialists and Christian missionaries stung Indian social reformers—from Ram Mohun Roy to Mahatma Gandhi—to work at emancipating our women and ending the discrimination of the lower castes. Now, the insults of the Americans should provoke us to bridge the gap between what the late Nani Palkhivala once called ‘a first class Constitution and a third class democracy’. For while India still retains the ‘hardware’ of democracy—a multi-party system, regular and reasonably fair elections, free speech and free movement of people—the ‘software’ of democracy has become badly corroded over the years, in four respects in particular.

First, the integrity of the All India Civil Services has been compromised. It was Mrs Indira Gandhi who introduced the idea of a ‘committed bureaucrat’; committed to the individual politician in power, rather than to the principles of the Constitution and the letter of the law. Since the 1970s, the politicization of the administration has proceeded apace. As P. S. Appu writes in a recent issue of the Economic and Political Weekly, officers of the IAS and the IPS have shown ‘a marked tendency to carry out the wishes of their political masters without pausing to consider if the contemplated action is in accordance with the law. Many of them have behaved like servile hatchet men, not as members of elite services owing unshakable allegiance to the Constitution, the laws of the land and the principles of democratic governance’.

The judiciary has been affected likewise. Especially in the lower courts, many judges are swayed by considerations other than those of the law; by the prospect of monetary gain, and by the pressures of politicians (the two often working together). In the High Courts and the Supreme Court, these pressures are attenuated but never wholly absent. In particular, the prospect of a plum post-retirement posting has been known to have made some judges unduly respectful of the wishes of the Government of the day.

Third, the Indian press too has lost some—perhaps much—of its once robust independence. The movie ‘Page Three’ is quite true-to-life here, in describing how the politician-industrialist complex is insidiously at work in spinning one kind of story and suppressing another. My own experience has been that while local papers kill stories for fear of losing government advertisements, national papers kill them for fear of losing corporate ads or because the editors or proprietors are seeking political preferment.

Fourth, politicians themselves have become completely amoral. When the first Non Co-operation movement turned violent, Mahatma Gandhi admitted to having committed a ‘Himalayan

Blunder'. Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged errors and made amends for them; as for instance when he created the linguistic states he had previously opposed. But from Mrs Indira Gandhi onwards, no Indian leader has admitted to having made a mistake. They are not accountable to the judicial process—thus no major politician has been convicted for corruption. But they are not accountable to their conscience either—indeed, few, recently, have shown signs of having one.

The degradation of Indian democracy began in 1970s, under the Congress regime of Mrs Indira Gandhi, but it reached its lowest point with the riots in Gujarat in 2002. The senior civil servants cravenly followed the politicians. As P. S. Appu writes, 'Gordhan Zadaphia, a VHP activist functioning directly under Modi as minister of state in the home department, took charge of the Ahmedabad police commissioner's control room'. The Gujarati press abdicated its role; some sections turning a blind eye to the violence, others justifying it. The local judiciary manipulated or disregarded evidence so as to free those accused of incitement to riot and murder. All this was supervised and rationalized by a Chief Minister who remains unrepentant about his very proactive role in the proceedings.

That the Gujarat riots took place at all; that they spread so far and so fast; that those who perpetrated the violence went scot free; that relief has been so tardy and inadequate; that the politicians who directed the riots remain in power—these are a consequence only of the frailties of the democratic process in India. In this sense, Narendra Modi is certainly 'our mass murderer'; in that it was we, collectively, who created the conditions for the mass murder over which he presided. It is here that the denial of an American visa to him can prove salutary. Rather than direct our nationalist ire without, we should channel our patriotic energies within, towards the renewal and reform of our democratic institutions. Let us ensure that no foreign government shall in future make an Indian politician the target of their hypocrisies—by making certain that no Indian politician can in future so comprehensively violate the human rights of the people he has been chosen to represent and serve.

## **SYCOPHANTS AND DEMOCRATS**

One day in the nineteen seventies, Leonid Brezhnev was in a town on Lake Baikal, attending a Politburo meeting. The Soviet Union was in its pomp, whereas the rival superpower was scarred at home by the scandal of Watergate, and abroad by the experience of defeat in Vietnam. Contemplating these events, Brezhnev was naturally feeling very pleased. The sky was blue and cloudless as he walked from the hotel to the conference venue. As he strolled along the lake, he was wished a respectful 'Good Morning' by a voice high above him. Brezhnev looked up, to find himself addressed by a great golden ball of fire. 'Good Morning, Comrade Brezhnev', said the sun. 'Good Morning, General Secretary of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Union; Good Morning, First Holder of the Order of Lenin; Good Morning, Commander-in-Chief of the Patriotic Forces of the Great Soviet Fatherland; Good Morning, Glorious Defender of the Rights



of the Working Class; Good Morning, Heroic and Selfless Leader of the World Proletarian Revolution!’

Brezhnev acknowledged these salutations graciously before proceeding, with ever lighter steps, to his meeting. That went well, with Gromyko and Andropov and other minions addressing him in the deferential terms to which he was properly accustomed. His work done, he walked back to his hotel. His mood was good—indeed it could not have been better—and the day was still cloudless. So benign was the Bear feeling that this time he chose to open the conversation. ‘Good evening, Comrade Sun’, said Brezhnev, addressing the ball of fire above him. ‘Bugger off, you fat oaf’, came the reply. ‘Bugger off, you petty, pompous dictator’. Brezhnev was thrown completely off guard. ‘Why this, Comrade Sun?’, he asked with a mixture of bemusement and pain: ‘You were so kind to me in the morning. What has happened to change your mood so?’. ‘In the morning I was in the East’, answered the sun, ‘now, thankfully, I am in the West’.

This story was told to me, years ago, by the Nepali scientist Dipak Gyawali, who studied in the Soviet Union, before (like the sun) moving over to the West (he took a Ph D from the University of California, then returned home to work in Kathmandu). One of many such then current in the Soviet Union, the story underlined the contrast between the democratic countries of the West, where one could criticize one’s leaders freely, and the authoritarian countries of the East, where deference and sycophancy were the order of the day.

The Cult of the Great Leader was indeed widespread in the Communist world. Mao in China, Hoxha in Albania, Castro in Cuba, were all portrayed by their media as heroic, almost superhuman; as flawless and beyond (or above) any criticism. Alas, deference and sycophancy are the order of the day in this country, too, despite its own official standing as one of the established democracies of the world. Here, the clash is not between totalitarianism and freedom, but between feudalism and modernity. The representative of modernity is the press; if rarely fearless, it is at least free. Unlike in Communist countries, where the media is wholly state-controlled, here newspapers and magazines can write critically about the failings of politicians. Our advantage in this regard is nullified, however, by the backwardness of society at large, where ancient traditions predispose the people to venerate and deify their leaders.

Years ago, in his final, summing-up speech to the Constituent Assembly, B. R. Ambedkar had warned Indians about the unthinking submission to charismatic authority. Ambedkar quoted John Stuart Mill, who cautioned citizens not ‘to lay their liberties at the feet of even a great man, or to trust him with powers which enable him to subvert their institutions’. There was, said Ambedkar, ‘nothing wrong in being grateful to great men who have rendered life-long services to the country’. But there were ‘limits to gratefulness’. Quoting the Irish patriot Daniel O’Connell, Ambedkar said that ‘no man can be grateful at the cost of his honour, no woman can be grateful at the cost of her chastity and no nation can be grateful at the cost of its liberty’.

This warning was even more pertinent here than in Ireland or England. For in India, noted Ambedkar, 'Bhakti or what what may be called the path of devotion or hero-worship, plays a part in its politics unequalled in magnitude by the part it plays in the politics of any other country in the world. Bhakti in religion may be the road to the salvation of a soul. But in politics, Bhakti or hero-worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship.'

This was spoken in 1949, a year and some months after the death of the most worshipped of Indian politicians, Mahatma Gandhi. Fortunately, Gandhi's heir, Jawaharlal Nehru, took Ambedkar's warning with some seriousness. He based his policies on procedures and principles, rather than on the force of his personality. Within the Congress, within the Cabinet, within the Parliament, Nehru tried to further the democratic, co-operative, collaborative ideals of the Indian Constitution. The judiciary, the bureaucracy, and the press were given full autonomy; there was no attempt to force them to do the Leader's bidding. Here, Nehru was working against the grain of history, against the deep-seated feudal and hierarchical tendencies in Indian society. Indeed, his own party, his bureaucracy, his press, would still tend to sometimes treat him as if he had the attributes of the divine.

Nehru might not have entirely succeeded in building a democratic, non-hierarchical culture in Indian politics. But it is notable that he tried. Which cannot, however, be said for his daughter Indira Gandhi. Her first few years as Prime Minister were a time of searching, but by the time of the elections of January 1971 she had refashioned the polity around the desires of a single individual. The Congress was an extension of herself, and in time the country would be too. When a prominent artist celebrated her as Durga after the war of December 1971 she nodded benignly in approval, taking it as no more than her due—her father would at least have been embarrassed. She cultivated sycophants and sycophancy; to be of influence in the Congress or the Government what mattered was your personal closeness to the Prime Minister, not your official position or your sphere of competence. Mrs Gandhi's doings in this regard contributed a new term to the Indian political lexicon: that of the 'Congress chamcha'.

The culmination of this process was the declaration, by the Congress President Deva Kanta Barooah in 1974, that 'Indira was India and India was Indira'. The next year, when a Court judgement went against her, and justice as well as decency demand that she resign the office of Prime Minister, Mrs Gandhi instead declared the Emergency, suppressed the Press, and put the Opposition leaders in jail. Bhakti or hero-worship in politics had led, as Dr Ambedkar had long ago warned, to degradation and eventually to dictatorship.

Mrs Gandhi lifted the Emergency and called elections in 1977. Democracy in this form returned, but bhakti in politics was here to stay. It now revealed itself most forcibly in the provinces, where the likes of M. G. Ramachandran and N. T. Rama Rao attempted to create leadership cults that would have impressed Leonid Brezhnev himself. Their initiatives in this regard have been taken further forward by Bal Thackeray and J. Jayalithaaa, who have used the bhakti of their followers in dangerously undemocratic ways. Those who disagree with them in public have

every chance of being physically attacked, as has been the experience of journalists in Mumbai and lawyers in Tamil Nadu.

Loyalty to the Leader, in person, rather than to the policies of his or her Government—such was the legacy of Mrs Indira Gandhi, to be furthered and distorted by MGR, NTR, Jayalalithaa, Thackeray and by Laloo Prasad Yadav and Mayawati too. These all are (or were) non-Congress leaders, but now the disease of sycophancy has once more manifested itself within the Grand Old Party. Sonia Gandhi's last birthday was celebrated at a well-attended function in New Delhi as 'Tyag Divas', with one speaker claiming that she embodied the virtues of the Buddha, Ashoka, and Mahatma Gandhi. Were this an ordinary Congress chamcha one might perhaps have disregarded it, but the person making these outrageous comparisons was the Union Home Minister, no less.

Building democracy in India was always going to be hard work. It involved the nurturing of institutions based on impersonal rules rather than on individual whims, on placing merit and transparency above the claims of caste and kin, on cultivating an ethic of interpersonal equality in a society steeped in hierarchy and deference. Democracy was a challenge that Nehru and Ambedkar, thinking of their country, were prepared to take on. Their followers and successors, thinking merely of themselves, have been content to be swept along with the flow.

## **THE SOCIOLOGY OF SUICIDE**

Karnataka has a large number of privately run medical and engineering colleges, to which flock students from all over the country. They come in the summer, when, for days upon end, their anxieties and hopes are splashed over the front pages of the newspapers in Bangalore. Every year, two kinds of stories make most of the headlines—battles between the government and private colleges, on how much the latter can charge as fees; and struggles within the colleges, as to how many seats will be allocated to 'out of state' students. To these familiar staples has now been added a third kind of story—featuring the suicides of disappointed candidates.

The taking of one's own life is the most private of acts, but, as the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim pointed out, the incidence of suicide varies widely across societies and historical periods. The psychological dislocation that causes one to kill oneself has deep social roots. In industrializing societies in particular, the rate of suicide tends to rise. The causes are various: the dissolution of social bonds as individuals move away from their family and community; the faster pace of life; and the growth of overweening ambition. In Durkheim's inimitable words (here translated by Steven Lukes), with the 'development of industry and the almost infinite extension of the market...', from top to bottom of the scale, greed is aroused unable to find ultimate foothold'. In modern towns driven by commerce and enterprise, men lose 'the taste and habit of domestic solidarity'. Individuals 'are less close', as 'the cold winds of egoism freezes

their hearts and weakens their spirits'. As a consequence, 'the bond attaching man to life slackens because the bond which attaches him to society is itself slack'.

Thus late nineteenth-century France, and thus also early twenty-first century India. It should come as no surprise that Bangalore, India's Silicon City, is also India's Suicide City. It is claimed that as many as 2000 cases are registered every year, accounting for 17% of all the suicides in the country. Notably, almost as many women as men attempt to take their lives. So far as gender is concerned there are no significant biases, but with regard to age and profession they certainly are. A majority of suicides are of those between twenty and thirty years of age. Very many of these are of software professionals.

Behind these very individual tragedies are some very social processes. Within a generation, this sleepy cantonment town has been transformed into a bustling metropolis. No city in India, and possibly even the world, has changed quite so much so soon. The most striking manifestation of this is in the city's skyline; with the lovely little bungalows that once were Bangalore's signature giving way to large apartment complexes and even larger shopping malls.

Fuelling this transformation of the built environment are changes in economy and society. A rapid rise in incomes has led to a still more rapid rise in desires. The young in Bangalore want a great deal more success than did their parents; and they want it more quickly. These ambitions are stoked by the press, which gives disproportionate coverage to men and women who are young and yet famous and rich—or rather, famous because they are rich. At least in Bangalore, the media has time for only three kinds of heroes: beauty queens, cricketers, and software titans.

But not everyone can become a beauty queen. (And even those who do despair of what will become of their life afterwards. Bangalore has produced its fair share of Miss India's, one of whom recently committed suicide.) Nor can there be more than a handful of software billionaires, either. Bangalore has perhaps a hundred thousand code writers who earn a considerable salary by Indian standards, a multiple of what their parents could ever hope to earn, but, for all this, still way below their expectations. The gap between ambition and reality has never been higher. The social and psychological costs of failure have never been higher, either.

Hence, perhaps, the increasing propensity within the young of Bangalore to kill themselves. But the cases reported this year point to a new phenomena—that of suicides among boys and girls before they have even started work. One reason for this, surely, is the prejudice among South Indian families against education in the humanities. At home, kids are told that engineering (and, at a pinch, medicine) are the only worthwhile subjects. Once, Art and Literature were permissible for girls who wished to get married. But now they too want to work, for which the mandated route is to join an engineering college. The mere denial of admission is then provocation enough to end their lives.

The city of Bangalore is one suicide centre of modern India; the rural hamlets of Andhra Pradesh, a second. In the one case, the victims come chiefly from the professional classes; in the

other, they are of the labouring poor. Since the mid nineties there has been a massive spurt in farmers' suicides—900 in the last five years according to one estimate, more than 3000 according to a second. The bulk of these suicides are in the 35-45 age bracket. Unlike in Bangalore, where the casualties are roughly even by gender, in the Andhra countryside they are mostly males. The cause in many cases is the inability to repay loans accumulated over the years.

There has been some sensitive field reporting of these incidents (notably by P. Sainath in *The Hindu*). But there has also been commentary that has been less helpful, or one might say, more ideological. One commentator speaks of the 'suicide economy of corporate globalization'; another says that 'globalization is killing the people of India'. They go on then to provide an indictment against the familiar demons of the Left: the WTO, the World Bank, Multinational Corporations, all working together in a conspiracy to murder the Andhra peasant.

Things are probably more complex. There is, for example, the fact that there have been four successive years of drought in the Deccan; for which one can scarcely hold the World Bank responsible. Again, there is clear evidence that, in the aggregate, the incidence of rural poverty has gone down in the past decade; the decade, precisely, of globalization and liberalization. However, while liberalization has generated wealth it has not distributed it evenly. More crucially, it has created great expectations among all sections of society; even, or perhaps especially, among those it leaves out. Because some 'feel-good' others 'feel-bad'; so bad, in fact, that they go so far as to take their lives.

In stable, so-to-say 'traditional' societies, suicide rates are never very high. Although comparative historical data are hard to find, I suspect that in India these rates have been even lower than usual. For example, creative writers and sportsmen are both notoriously prone to suicide—but there are no Indian equivalents of Yukio Mishima or Sylvia Plath, and no Indians profiled in David Frith's classic study of cricketing suicides, *By Your Own Hand*.

In premodern India, the bonds of family and community provided succour in times of distress. This was true in city as well as country. Middle class families always had room for failures: for the boy who could not pass his exams, yet was treated with affection, and even indulgence, by those around him. And while rural indebtedness has been endemic in Indian history, prior to the last two decades one did not hear of farmers killing themselves on that account alone.

There was however, one striking exception: the form of ritual suicide known as sati. But this was restricted to the upper castes; and was not very widespread among them either. Above all, it was a form of coercion; not a voluntary taking of one's life (as modern suicide is), but an act forced upon one by custom and tradition.

The rash of suicides in city and village is a qualitatively new development in our history. We sense that the tragedies are as much social as they are individual. But we know very little of what lies behind them. What we now await, in sum, is an Indian Durkheim.

## EDUCATING OUR WOMEN

Some years ago, while working on a history of cricket in India, I was reading issues of a now defunct newspaper called the Bombay Sentinel. It took time to get to the sports pages, for they were at the end, and one was prone to get diverted by the other stories on the way. Searching for the scores of the Bombay Pentangular tournament of 1940, I came across a report on a meeting of the Dehra Dun branch of the All India Women's Conference. The meeting was attended by no fewer than a thousand women, 'belonging to all classes, creeds and communities'. In her Presidential address, a certain Begum Hamid Ali said that 'now the time has come that we, women, should resort to satyagraha for securing our equal rights from our fellow men'. The Begum insisted that 'we do not demand these rights because we are human beings but because we have equal, if not more, ability, intelligence and moral force. We have had no opportunities for their full play... Opportunities for progress and development should be available not only to our sons but to our daughters also, if the nation, as a whole, is to make solid and abiding progress in all spheres of life'.

I recalled that report last week, when I read, in a Bombay newspaper of our own times, an account of two women resorting to a kind of satyagraha for securing equal rights from their fellow men. Irfaana Mujawar and Gazala Mughal were joined by a burning desire to educate themselves and educate others. One took an M. A. in Sociology; the other, a diploma in crafts. Then, rather than submit to their parents and get married, they pooled their savings and started a school for girls in the slums of Jogeshwari. As the reporter put it, 'single by choice, each of them wanted to do something for society'. Both were deeply affected by the riots of 1992-3, where the Muslims in particular suffered greatly. After the riots, said Gazala, people of their community 'realized it is important to be educated and fit into the mainstream'. To further these ambitions, she joined hands with Irfaana to start the Young Indians School. With five other teachers—all women, all Muslim—they were helping 125 little girls become the first generation of literates in their respective families.

Amazingly, these two reports were published on the same day, if sixty-four years apart: the first in the Bombay Sentinel of 12 July 1940, the other in the 'Mumbai Newslines' of the Indian Express on 12 July 2004. Begum Hamid, on the one side, and Irfaana and Gazala, on the other, are indeed united by their desire to break free of the chains of a feudal and patriarchal society. But there are also some key differences, pertaining to historical context and, more importantly, to class background.

The ideas and impulses of a Begum Hamid were nurtured in the womb of the Indian national movement. As Madhu Kishwar once pointed out, Mahatma Gandhi brought more women into public life than any other political leader of the twentieth century. More women participated in

the Indian freedom struggle than in the movements of Lenin, Mao, Soekarno, Ho Chi Minh and Castro combined.

These were the women who responded to the challenge of colonialism by going to school and college, and then taking up professions previously regarded as a male preserve. The process started first in the three Presidency towns, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, which by the first decade of the twentieth century already had numerous women graduates and postgraduates. But by the last decade of British rule even the most backward parts of India were not immune from its influence. Thus the Bombay Sentinel of 22 July 1940 profiled a certain Mahmooda Ahmed Ali, the first Kashmir girl to be awarded a M. A. and a B. T. Miss Ali had been elected the President of the Freethinkers Society of Srinagar, formed 'for intellectual and cultural advancement'.

Admittedly, the women influenced by Indian nationalism were mostly from the middle and upper classes. In the countryside things remained much as they had for centuries. In the winter of 1946-7, the civil servant Malcolm Darling took a ride across northern India to gauge the pulse of a people soon to be free. With him was his daughter, April, who had of course gone to school and college herself. In a village in Western Punjab, April asked the peasants: 'And what about your women? Are they demanding Azaadi too?' The question met with 'a blank circle of eyes'. When pressed for an answer, the Punjabi peasants said that women could not, should not have Azaadi, for their place was in the home. As April Darling found out, both Hindu as well as Muslim men felt that way.

After Independence, the education of upper class women proceeded apace. So did the expansion of their opportunities. Decades before such landmarks were achieved in supposedly advanced countries such as the United States, India had women Governors, women Prime Ministers, women judges and women Vice Chancellors. But in the hamlets of rural India, and the slums of urban India, young girls were still encouraged to stay within the home (first their own, then that of their husband's). Slowly, the demand for education grew among women from poorer families as well. But progress was slow, and uneven. Broadly speaking, the southern states were more supportive of women's education than the states of the cow-belt. There was also a religious differentiation—thus, Christians were generally the most keen to send their girls to school, followed by Hindus, and only then by Muslims.

In recent years, however, there have been surprising developments among sections of Indian society believed to be hostile to women's rights. Thus the northern state of Himachal Pradesh has made major strides in primary education. And from the slums of Bombay we have stories such as that of the Young Indians School of Jogeshwari, started by two bold Muslim women, Irfaana Mujawar and Gazala Mughal.

I read about Irfaana and Gazala on the flight into Bombay. The same evening, I was on the pavement in Flora Fountain, searching for treasures in what is now—after the decline of College

Street—the best second-hand book bazaar in the country. At one stall I saw two ladies, in burkhas, escorting a little girl, dressed in a skirt. The girl stooped low and selected a book to buy. It was, I noted with interest, a work by the well known American children's writer Nancy Drew. With a laugh and a smile the ladies took out their purses and granted the child's wish.

One news report, and a single, isolated incident—but from what I learn from friends in the education movement these instances are rather typical. In the old city of Delhi, as in the bustees of Bombay, there is a hunger for learning among Muslim girls and women. Many of the most energetic volunteers in the best education NGO's come from the minority community and the suppressed sex. It would be interesting to see how this process pans out over the next few years. Will, for example, the boys be encouraged by the girls to take to modern education, to learn how to write software in a school of information technology rather than learn the Quran by rote in a madrassah?

In the past, Hindus have been far ahead of Muslims in their desire for modern scientific education. But things may be changing. Even as the likes of Irfaana and Gazala teach in English in a slum in Bombay, the Sangh Parivar promotes a curriculum based on less wholesome values. Studying R. S. S. run schools in the tribal villages of Chattisgarh, the anthropologist Nandini Sundar found that they were, as she put it, 'teaching to hate'. Their schools were adorned with portraits of Hindu gods and goddesses, and of Hindu heroes who were certifiably chauvinistic—V. D. Savarkar and Deen Dayal Upadhyay, rather than Gandhi or Nehru. The teachers demonized the foreigner and the minorities, with children made to sing songs 'about the need to fight the neighbouring country and demolish it as brave children of Savarkar'. And a core part of the curriculum was instruction in Vedic mathematics.

It is a curious irony, indeed. As Muslim girls seek to break free of the constraining insularity of their tradition, the self-appointed guardians of Hinduism wish to impose a narrow-minded xenophobia on their professedly liberal faith.

## **A PLAGUE ON BOTH YOUR HOUSES**

Bangalore voted on Sunday the 20th of April, the first round of polling. Anticipating crowds in the morning, my wife and I went to the neighbourhood booth in the afternoon. Outside, the names of the candidates were pasted on the walls. There were a dozen candidates in all but here, as in many other parts of India, the real contest was between the Congress and the BJP. 'How can one vote for a party that harbours Narendra Modi?', asked my wife. 'But how can one vote for a party which is so cravenly sycophantic towards Rahul Gandhi?', she continued.

It would be a breach of propriety for me to reveal whom my wife finally voted for. Still, it seems clear that her dilemma was shared by millions of other voters. For, even more than booth-



capturing in Bihar and Bengal, our democracy is disfigured and demeaned by the character and record of our two professedly 'national' parties.

Let me begin with the party in power. The problem with the BJP is that it speaks in many voices. Thus, its campaign in Karnataka (as in other states) was opened by Pravin Togadia, a man best described as the Osama of the Hindus. His meeting was held near an area dominated by Muslims and Christians. His speech threatened and taunted the minorities. After it was over, his supporters marched menacingly through the streets, brandishing their trishuls.

A few weeks later the BJP sent its star campaigner, the Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee. Here was the voice of sweet reasonableness, speaking of 'development' and 'governance' and of India's exalted place in the world. Unfortunately, the exit polls that followed the first round of polling did not show the BJP to be doing particularly well. So, the party asked Narendra Modi to tour the parts of the state that had not yet gone to the polls. His speeches were peppered with vulgar personal remarks against the Congress President and her representatives in Karnataka. He did not specifically mention Hindus, or Muslims for that matter. But then he did not have to—his presence was enough to signal what his party thought of the respective rights of those communities.

The people in power speak of themselves as the 'Sangh Parivar'. They are indeed a family, an Indian family, with all the diversity that this implies. In ideological terms, the members of the Parivar span the range from humanity to barbarism. Closest to the left, or human end of the scale, is Mr Vajpayee. A little to his right is Mr L. K. Advani, a little further Mr M. M. Joshi. Notably, the views of this BJP 'trimurti' are themselves variable. That is, they are more moderate when in power, and more extreme when out of it.

The three men I have mentioned are members of the BJP, which is a political party. But they are also all members of a mass organization that does not fight elections, namely, the RSS. It might even be that, when push comes to shove, the trio will choose the Sangh over the party. (Recall that the Prime Minister once declared, in New York no less, that he was first and foremost a 'swayamsevak'.) In any case, the RSS as a whole is more doctrinaire than the BJP. While the latter might prevaricate on issues like cow-slaughter, Article 370, the Ram Mandir, and the 'proper' place of minorities, the Sangh is unswerving. In their view, the first two must go—the sooner the better—and the third must be built—pronto. As for Muslims and Christians, they must convincingly display their loyalty to Bharat Mata, by, for instance, singing Vande Matram while drinking their morning milk.

Substantially to the right of the RSS is the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. If the Sangh is dogmatic and reactionary, the Parishad is fanatic and fundamentalist. The Sangh still sets store by ideology and propaganda. The Parishad believes only in threats and intimidation. It is explicit in arguing that non-Hindus can, at best, hope to be second-class citizens of India. Their model in this respect appears to be the Islamic state of Pakistan. Thus Ashok Singhal, while President of the VHP,

insisted that since in Pakistan minorities voted in separate electorates, in India they must do likewise.

Still further right, at the barbaric end of the spectrum, is the Bajrang Dal. These are the stormtroopers of the Hindu right, being to the BJP and the RSS what the SS and the Hitler Youth once were to the Nazis. Their record is bloody indeed. In the pogroms in Bombay in 1992-3 and Gujarat in 2002 they played the vanguard role. Their philosophy is captured in the slogan 'Kabristan ya Pakistan!' If their confreres accord second-class status to the minorities, the Bajrang Dal believes that the proper place of Muslims in India is below ground, in the graveyard.

The RSS is more extreme than the BJP, the VHP more extreme than the RSS, the Bajrang Dal more extreme than the VHP. Moreover, and this is what is crucial, the BJP does not control the RSS, while the RSS does not control the VHP or the Bajrang Dal. This means, in sum, that within the Parivar itself, humanity can never vanquish barbarism.

Consider now the state of the BJP's main national rival, the Congress. The idea that members of a single family are born to rule is deeply undemocratic. But so long as this principle operates, talented and patriotic young Indians will not join the Congress, where progress within the party depends not on ability or merit but on proximity to the ruling family.

In fairness, the problems of the Congress do not begin or end with the dynasty. There is the party's hypocrisy, as witness its attitude to economic reforms or to nuclear bombs—both of which it opposes when in the Opposition, but supports when in power. There is its wooing of the most reactionary elements among the Muslims, in contemptuous disregard of its own secular past. Jawaharlal Nehru often said that the act he was proudest of was the reform of Hindu personal law, which gave rights to millions of Indian women. He wanted, in time, to extend those rights to Muslim women too. His wish has been stalled not by the Hindu reactionaries (who were the strongest opponents of the reform of Hindu law) but by his own party, indeed, by his own daughter and, especially, by his grandson.

The Constitution of India lists a Uniform Civil Code as one of its Directive Principles. It is truly bizarre that this principle is now supported by the BJP and opposed by the Congress—for, in the nineteen fifties, when Nehru and Ambedkar took their first, bold steps towards the reform of personal laws, it was the Jana Sangh and the RSS which most bitterly opposed them. Even now, I do not think the BJP is serious about the Uniform Civil Code—if it was, why has it not introduced it in Parliament these six years it has been in power? (The Parivar speaks of the UCC only to spite the Congress and taunt the Muslims.) If the Congress had more courage, it would ask for a national debate on the elements of a gender-sensitive code of family law that would apply to all citizens. That, I believe, would take the wind out of the BJP's sails while restoring its own secular credentials.

Such then, are our two national parties—one parochial and communal, the other feudal and hypocritical. Which one do we choose? The dilemma of the sensitive Indian brings to mind a

now forgotten but once very intense debate, which took place among the French intelligentsia during the Cold War. One side, led by Raymond Aron, chose the United States and capitalism. The other side, led by Jean-Paul Sartre, chose the Soviet Union and capitalism. Asked which side he was on, the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty answered: 'Between Soviet communism and American capitalism, I choose—Marlene Dietrich'.

Tailpiece: Since this piece is being published just before West Bengal goes to the polls, I should place on record this statutory warning: What this article says about the Congress and the BJP should on no account be read as an endorsement of the Left Front.

### **A SALUTE TO SMALLER STATES**

Kavalam Madhavan Pannikar was one of the more interesting characters of twentieth-century India. He was a well regarded novelist in his native Malayalam, and an influential historian in English. Perhaps the best known of his books is *Asia and Western Dominance*, which dealt with what he termed 'the Vasco Da Gama epoch of Asian history'.

As it happens, for Pannikar writing was but a secondary career. For he was a public official of distinction, working as an adviser to the princes before Independence. The Maharaja of Patiala, on whose staff he served, liked him so much that he gave him the honorary title of 'Sardar'. His intelligence also attracted the attention of Jawaharlal Nehru, who, after 1947, sent him as our first Ambassador to China.

I first came across the name of Pannikar about twenty-five years ago, in the pages of the autobiography of the anthropologist Verrier Elwin. (He features there as the teller of one of the best stories in what is a most lively and amusing book.) More recently, while working on a history of independent India, I have encountered Pannikar playing roles good and bad. An example of the former is his advice, as Dewan, to the Maharaja of Bikaner to join the Constituent Assembly in the first months of 1947. As a historian, Pannikar could see that the forces of nationalism were irresistible; if the princes did not compromise with the Congress, they would be swept away. Rather than fantasize about 'independence', said Pannikar to his boss, it would be wise to join India, and advise his fellow Maharajas to do likewise. As the civil servant and scholar Penderel Moon pointed out at the time, Pannikar and Bikaner had 'led the Rajput princes in a fresh act of traditional obeisance to Delhi, where in place of Mogul or British, a Pandit now rules. They have made a compact with Congress—probably, from their point of view, rightly.' After Bikaner and company, dozens of other princes also joined India, thus adding to the value of that original change of heart.

However, Pannikar's work as Indian Ambassador to China was less wholesome. When, in 1949, the Kuomintang were overthrown by the Communists, India retained him to indicate continuity.

In May 1950, Pannikar was granted an interview with Mao Zedong, and came away greatly impressed. Mao's face, he wrote, was 'pleasant and benevolent and the look in his eyes is kindly'. There 'is no cruelty or hardness either in his eyes or in the expression of his mouth. In fact he gave me the impression of a philosophical mind, a little dreamy but absolutely sure of itself'. The Chinese leader had 'experienced many hardships and endured tremendous sufferings', yet 'his face showed no signs of bitterness, cruelty or sorrow'. Mao reminded Pannikar of his own boss, Nehru, for 'both are men of action with dreamy, idealistic temperaments', and both 'may be considered humanists in the broadest sense of the term'.

This would be laughable if it were not so serious. The intellectual has always had a curious fascination for the man of power; George Bernard Shaw wrote about Lenin in much the same terms. Yet Shaw was an unaffiliated writer, responsible only to himself. Pannikar was the official representative of his Government. What he said and believed would carry considerable weight. And here he was representing one of history's most ruthless dictators as a dreamy, soft, poetic, kind of chap. Indeed, Pannikar's advice in those early years led Nehru and the Government of India to seriously underestimate the Chinese.

One for Pannikar, one against. Let me now turn to what must be one of his least remembered initiatives, as a member of the States Reorganization Commission of 1955. That Commission put the official seal on the reorganization of India on linguistic lines. But, tucked away in an appendix to the main report, is a minute of dissent offering a recommendation that was never implemented.

The minute was written by K. M. Pannikar, and it suggested that the state of Uttar Pradesh be broken up into two more-or less equal parts. This, he argued, was necessary for efficient administration and, more crucially, in the interests of a stable national polity. Pannikar pointed out that it was 'essential for the successful working of a federation that the units should be fairly evenly balanced. Too great a disparity is likely to create not only suspicion and resentment but generate forces likely to undermine the federal structure itself and thereby be a danger to the country'. For 'it would be easy to see that this preponderant influence which would accrue to a very large unit could be abused, and would in any case be resented by all the other constituent units. Modern governments are controlled, to a lesser or greater extent, by party machines, within which the voting power of a numerically strong group goes a very long way'. Thus, as things stood, the state of Uttar Pradesh was 'in a position to exercise an unduly large measure of political influence'.

As it has indeed done. Six of free India's first seven Prime Ministers have come from Uttar Pradesh. It was the 'UP bloc' within the Congress that effectively ran the party for the first twenty years after Independence. Not long after Pannikar's warnings, this bloc made its impact felt in his native Kerala. When Jawaharlal Nehru hesitated in dismissing the first Communist government in that state, he was persuaded to do so by U. P. Congressmen, thus setting a

precedent for the too-hasty use of Article 356.

Uttar Pradesh continues to exercise a disproportionate influence on Indian politics. It is, by common consent, one of the most backward states in the country: backward economically, but also socially and culturally. Yet by sending as many as eighty M. P.'s to the Lok Sabha it can virtually shape the future of India. This is tragic, not least because the agenda of U. P. is not necessarily the agenda of the rest of India.

Consider here the politics of the parties that matter in the U. P.. On the one hand, there are the B. S. P. and the S. P., who stoke the animosities of caste in their bids to capture a majority of the seats in the State. On the other hand, there is the B. J. P., which over the past twenty years has expanded its base by playing on religious fanaticism. (It is no accident that the president of its U. P. unit is Vinay Katiyar, a man who can make Narendra Modi sound reasonable.) Now, when that strategy has exhausted its potential, the B. J. P. compete with the S. P. in trying to please the ulema and thereby capture the Muslim vote. For its part, the Congress has attempted to arrest its decline in the U. P. by sending out the latest representative of the party's ruling family. Caste prejudice, religious chauvinism, the charisma of 'royalty'—these, and not development or governance, are what dominate the rhetoric of elections in the State. These forms of reactionary politics are impelled by the simple fact that the domination of U. P. is the safest route to the domination of India.

As K. M. Pannikar argued long ago, when a single unit contains some 20 % of a federation's population, it does not bode well for its functioning. There is little question that the division of U. P. into two (or more) equal units would be beneficial for India. And, I submit, it shall be beneficial to the people of the U. P. as well. For the smaller the State, the more accessible the politicians and officials, and the greater the attention paid to education, health, and employment generation—that is, to the things that should mean far more to people's lives than the building of Ram temples or Ambedkar statues.

### **THE FAMILY BUSINESS**

The poet Dom Moraes has written of how, fresh from Oxford, he went to call on India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru liked young writers, and this one had come with good credentials; he was the son of one of India's leading editors, and had won a sheaf of literary prizes himself. The conversation was friendly and warm, until the Prime Minister asked Dom Moraes what he intended to do when he came back to India. The young man said he would stay on in England, as he wanted to make a career as a writer. The Prime Minister answered that he could have become a writer too, but had chosen to put service of country above indulgence of the self.

This was no idle boast. For Nehru wrote English as well as any Englishman. He had, too, a wide range of reading, and a wider range of experience, these used to good effect in the three major books he wrote: *Glimpses of World History*, *Autobiography*, and *Discovery of India*. He could have been a professional writer and also, if he had so chosen, a professional lawyer. After graduating from Cambridge he had trained in law in London; while his father, Motilal, had a flourishing practice in the courts of Allahabad. When Jawaharlal returned from England, he did the logical (and safe) thing—he joined his father. But in a few years he had left the law, and made Motilal leave the law too. Together they plunged deep into the national movement. Now commenced years of sacrifice and struggle. Motilal died in 1930. but it was another seventeen years before India became free. Much of that time Jawaharlal was in jail.

Jawaharlal Nehru could have been a lawyer or writer, but he chose to be a freedom fighter and politician. The career options open to his daughter Indira were rather more limited. She was not a scholar; she came down from Oxford without a degree. She married and had children, and then spent a decade-and-a-half as her father's hostess. The first job she ever held was the Presidency of the Indian National Congress, to which she was appointed in 1959, when she was forty-two. After a year in this post she went jobless again. Then, in 1964, Lal Bahadur Shastri made her Minister of Information and Broadcasting, this more a gesture to the memory of her father than an acknowledgement of merit or capability. When Shastri died she was, to her own surprise, catapulted into the post of Prime Minister. There were other and better candidates for the job, but the Congress bosses (notably K. Kamaraj) thought that they could more easily control a lady they thought to be a *ghungi gudiya* (dumb doll).

It turned out otherwise. In power Mrs Gandhi displayed a streak of ruthlessness few had seen in her before. She split the Congress, threw out the bosses, and with the slogan of 'Garibi Hatao' re-fashioned herself as a saviour of the poor. While she was growing into her new job, Mrs Gandhi's two sons were trying out careers of their own. The elder boy, Rajiv, after having followed his mother in having failed to complete a degree (at Cambridge this time), took a pilot's license and joined Indian Airlines. The younger boy, Sanjay, wisely decided not to go to university at all. He apprenticed at Rolls Royce, where his lack of discipline provoked a flood of anguished correspondence between his mother and the Indian High Commission in London, who were naturally worried about the repercussions of the son's waywardness on the reputation of the Prime Minister.

In time Sanjay returned to India, and sought to set up a car factory of his own. He said he would manufacture not limousines but a 'people's car' named Maruti. Despite the gift of cheap land (from a sycophantic Chief Minister of Haryana) and soft loans from public sector banks, the project failed to deliver on its promises. Another of Sanjay's *chamchas*, the editor of the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, claimed that his factory would roll out 50,000 cars a year. 'Soon little Marutis should be seen on the roads of Haryana and Delhi', wrote the editor: 'and a month or two later they will be running between Kalimpong and Kanyakumari'.

As it happened, Sanjay Gandhi's factory did not produce a single roadworthy car. (The little Marutis that now run on Indian roads are based on the Japanese design of a standard Suzuki vehicle.) It seems that Sanjay anticipated this for, in 1975, when his factory was yet to be completed, he went in search of another career. He had not to search very far; no further than his own home, in fact. Isolated by the Emergency, his mother needed support, and her younger son was happy to provide it. He soon showed that he enjoyed authority even more than Mrs Gandhi himself. Some of the more notorious events of the Emergency, such as the forced sterilizations and the demolitions of homes in Old Delhi, were the handiwork of Sanjay.

By the time the Emergency ended Sanjay Gandhi had discarded any pretence of his being a maker of cars. Henceforth it was all politics for him. He fought two Lok Sabha elections, became General Secretary to the Congress, and served as his mother's deputy on all matters concerning the party and (from January 1980) the Government. But then in June of that year he died in an air crash. The mother, bereft, turned to her elder son to take Sanjay's place.

While Sanjay was alive, Rajiv Gandhi had shown no inclination to join politics. His main ambition, he said, was to graduate from flying Avros on the Delhi-Lucknow run to flying Boeings between Calcutta and Bombay. By June 1980 he had been flying for twelve years, but his record did not yet merit the promotion he so ardently desired. He was rather luckier in politics. Once he had answered Mummy's call, and changed his career, the rewards were swift. In less than five years of joining the Congress he had become Prime Minister of India.

The historical retrospective I have provided here explains why young Rahul Gandhi had to join politics sooner rather than later. For, like his father and his uncle, he had tried other careers and failed. His name, and little else, got him admission into India's most prestigious undergraduate college, St. Stephen's. After a year there he transferred to a place more highly regarded still, Harvard, the wires being pulled for this at the highest levels. There is no record of his having completed a degree there. It is believed that he then went to Cambridge, but details of what he did there are hazy. At any rate, he then took a job, but doesn't seem to have been especially suited for the world of management and commerce. For this assertion we have his word. When asked in a recent interview whether he felt any regret in leaving his job in the corporate sector, Rahul Gandhi candidly answered: 'I was getting hammered there, too'.

Which brings me back to Jawaharlal Nehru. The first family of the Congress is sometimes referred to as the 'Nehru-Gandhi dynasty'. This is a misnomer, and grossly unfair to Nehru. For there is no evidence that he wished to create a political dynasty, no evidence that he desired that his daughter should become Prime Minister of India. It was Indira Gandhi who created the dynasty; she brought her sons into the Congress, and made it clear to all, within and outside the party, that she expected them to succeed her.

There is another, and perhaps more consequential reason, to separate Jawaharlal Nehru from later generations of the family. It is this; whereas for him joining politics was a matter of

commitment and sacrifice, for the others politics has served as a comfortable safety net. Jawaharlal could have been a top lawyer, or an internationally renowned writer; he chose to fight for the freedom of his country instead. The cases of Rajiv, Sanjay, and Rahul are all too different. After having failed to distinguish themselves in other fields—flying, car production, and management, respectively—they took their mother’s advice to enter the family business—where there was a place reserved for them at the very top.

## HINDU POPES

When the Babri Masjid was demolished in December 1992, a prominent Mahant of Ayodhya called it the first step in making the town the ‘Vatican of the Hindus’. I was recently reminded of that statement, while reading the Oxford historian R.W. Southern’s classic *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*. This book skilfully sets medieval Christianity in its social context. Southern analyses the relations between Church and State, and the economic bases of both. He foregrounds the primacy of the papacy, yet tells us also about the monastic orders which attracted some of the ablest minds of the time.

Reading Southern, I asked myself—where would I find a comparable account of Hinduism? Where is the book that elegantly and authoritatively maps out the different theological trends, sects, orders and authorities that make up this particular religious complex? So far as I know, no such study exists. For religious history is an undeveloped field in India, despite the diversity of faiths to be found in the subcontinent, and despite the continuing hold of religion on the popular imagination.

As a scholar, I hope that works like *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* will inspire comparable studies of Indian religious traditions and institutions. Meanwhile, as a citizen, I was struck by the parallels between Christianity as it was practised in medieval Europe, and the contemporary Indian movement known as Hindutva. Consider the following:

1. Medieval Christianity was obsessed with defeating Islam, viewed as the main and sometimes sole enemy. Representative here is a letter written in 1267 by the Pope in Rome to the Greek Emperor in Constantinople. ‘The Crusade is being prepared’, wrote the Pope, ‘and the whole of Europe is rising at our bidding. If you will attack the Moslems on one side while the Crusaders attack them on the other, we shall see an end of their damnable religion for ever’.
2. The Vatican drew much of its authority from the presence of the physical remains of Jesus’s proselytizing apostle St. Peter, he who brought the faith to the previously pagan terrain of Europe. Rome was the ‘most holy burial place of the most blessed body of St. Peter’. The Pope was the representative of St. Peter; St. Peter the representative of Jesus; and Jesus the son of God. Having the apostle’s remains buttressed the Vatican’s claim to be the centre of the



Christian community. In a similar fashion, the association of Ram, the best loved incarnation of Vishnu, with Ayodhya, shall justify that city's claim to be the Vatican of Hinduism.

3. Medieval Christianity was an centralized, quasi-totalitarian, political system. Thus the edicts of the influential eleventh century pope, Gregory VII proclaimed that 'the pope can be judged by no one'; that 'an appeal to the papal court inhibits judgement by all inferior courts'; that the pope 'alone can make new laws, set up new bishoprics, and divide old ones'; and, most importantly, that 'the Roman church has never erred and never will err till the end of time'.

This credo reminds one of Communism in its pomp. Neither Mao nor Lenin were ever known to have made a mistake. Nor, I believe, has the sarsanghchalak of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

4. The Pope and his bishops were especially keen to gain the allegiance, and preferably obeisance, of the political rulers of the day. As Southern observes, the church authorities were always at pains to emphasize 'the inferiority of the secular to the spiritual power'. Kings and nobles had continually to defer to the Pope. Much is the case with modern day Hindutva. Our Prime Minister bows and scrapes before the Shankaracharya, and our Chief Ministers are sworn in before rows upon rows of bearded gentlemen dressed in saffron.

5. While some religious leaders had a genuine interest in matters of the spirit, some others were more keen on matters of the mundane world. In the historical record, says Southern, there are 'few signs that the cultivation of [a Christian] character was the main preoccupation of the bishops of the western church. It is as organisers, administrators, magnates and politicians that the surviving documents mainly depict them'. Likewise, a future historian studying the periodical literature of the India of the 1990s is likely to conclude that saints and sadhus preferred politics and administration to theology and doctrine. Southern writes of a particular German bishop that he was 'simply a political agent in ecclesiastical dress'. Much the same could be said of many of our Hindu holy men today.

6. Notwithstanding the professed ideals of the Church, then, 'secular motives were everywhere uppermost and everywhere prevailed'. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, writes Southern, 'many contemporaries were beginning to think that the church was a conspiracy between secular and ecclesiastical authorities for the exploitation of ecclesiastical wealth'. How true this is of so many temples today!

7. As men of this world, the clergy took most interest in their own well-being. Southern calls the priesthood 'the greatest of all trade unions' in the Middle Ages. Hindu swamis likewise have been quick to understand the importance of acting collectively in their own self-interest.

Sociologists have written of Hindutva as being an attempt to 'Semiticize' Hinduism. By this they mean that a previously plural, diffuse, unorganized and even anarchic religion is being refashioned along more formal lines. Hindutva aims to create a clear chain of command, a

definite centre of authority, where previously there was none. For Hindus have failed to act as a unified, cohesive community, complains the Sangh Parivar. They have been hampered by the absence of one Holy Book, a Quran or a Bible, and the absence of one holy place, a Rome or a Mecca. Ram, and Ayodhya, will be made to step into the breach.

Of the three great religions that are 'Semitic' in origin, Judaism has had the least influence in India. But Islam and Christianity have both made a powerful impact on the subcontinent. Indeed, much of modern day Hinduism can be understood as a response to the challenge of those two faiths. Some Hindus, like Gandhi, were provoked by Islam and Christianity to attack the evils in their own society, such as discrimination against women and low castes. Other Hindus, such as those clustered in the Sangh Parivar, seem to have taken an altogether different lesson from the Semitic religions. From them they have learnt to blur the boundaries between Church and State, to claim infallibility for their own faith, and to demonize other faiths.

Karl Marx once claimed that 'the more developed society shows to the less developed the image of its future'. In this, as in so much else, the bearded German prophet got it wrong. For modern India seeks to emulate medieval, not modern, Europe. Sadly, this is true both for Hindutva and for its political opponents. The apostles of the Sangh Parivar are inspired by long dead mullahs and padres; but so, it seems, are men such as Laloo Prasad Yadav. Listen now to this final quote from R. W. Southern's *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages*: 'Nepotism, political bribery, and the appropriation of institutional wealth to endow one's family, were not crimes in medieval rulers; they were part of the art of government, no less necessary in popes than in other men'. India's present, Europe's past?

## **RECONCILING THE NAGAS**

Since its birth, the Indian nation-state has been challenged by rebellion and insurgency. In the late forties it was the Communist Party of India, who launched a countrywide insurrection claiming that the freedom we got from the British was false (in their evocatively pernicious slogan, 'Ye Azadi Jhoota Hai!'). In the fifties, it was the Dravidians of the South, who threatened to secede in protest against Aryan domination. In the sixties it was the Naxalites, who thought they could do in India what Mao and his colleagues had done in China. In the seventies it was the JP Andolan, which brought social life to a standstill in many states and compelled the most drastic of repressive measures, namely, the Emergency. In the eighties it was the Assamese and the Sikhs, both of whom sought (like the Tamils) freedom from exploitation by Delhi. In the nineties it was the Kashmiris, large sections of whom have showed their disaffection with Indian rule through the use of arson and assassination.

At their peak these movements all enjoyed widespread popular support. They dominated the front pages of newspapers, and were each considered a threat to the 'unity and integrity' of India. But in the end the state's patience and armed strength prevailed. The Communist revolutionaries

of the forties forsook the gun for the ballot. The Tamils and Sikhs were in time reconciled to being part of India. Whether the Kashmiris will also follow this route remains to be seen.

In this column I wish to talk of an insurgency that has been us since the time of Indian independence. Yet because of its geographical location it has never quite got the attention it deserves.

I refer, of course, to the Naga rebellion. Strictly speaking, this predates independence. In 1946 was formed a Naga National Council. This urged the British not to hand them over to the Indians when they left. The next year, a Naga delegation signed an agreement with the Governor of Assam which protected their lands and customs while agreeing to be part of India. The agreement would run for ten years; the assumption, at any rate on the Naga side, was that they would be free to decide afresh whether they wished the agreement to continue, or whether they would instead choose to become a separate nation-state.

From the beginning, militant sections among the Nagas wanted nothing to do with India. They organized a boycott of the 1952 General Elections, as well as a boycott of a trip to the Naga Hills by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The radical leader, A. N. Phizo, came to New Delhi, but his talks failed on the question of independence (which he claimed) versus autonomy (which the Government was willing to grant). Phizo went underground, and the insurgency began. For the next decade there were bitter battles between the security forces and the Naga rebels. There were heavy casualties on both sides, and much loss of civilian life.

In 1960 Phizo escaped to London, and made an impression on the British press. Stories were printed about Indian 'atrocities'. These alarmed Nehru, who sought now to negotiate with the moderate Nagas. An agreement was signed to establish a full-fledged state of Nagaland—this a significant concession, since there were less than half-a-million Nagas, whereas other states had populations of twenty million and more. The compromise, however, was resented and opposed by the extremists. And so the civil war restarted, and, in fits and starts, has continued to this day.

The course of the Naga rebellion has been deeply shaped by tribal loyalties. Many of the early insurgents, like Phizo himself, were Angamis. The Aos, on the other hand, were always more ready to talk to the Indians. The Semas were divided—they had both radicals and reformists in their ranks. More recently, the movement has been taken over by Thangkul Nagas from Manipur.

In the nineteen sixties Jayaprakash Narayan travelled extensively in Nagaland. In 1965 he published a pamphlet called Nagaland mein Shanti ka Prayas (The Prospects for Peace in Nagaland) which bears re-reading today. JP argued that there was a civilizational unity in India which antedates its political unity. Even East and West Pakistan shared in this unity—as he put it, 'wahan ke Islam par bhi bharatiyata ka rang chad gaya hai'—their Islam is tinged with the colour of Indian-ness. But the Nagas had not been influenced in the least by Indian culture. They had a marked sense of separate-ness, this reinforced by their recent conversion to Christianity.

JP's investigations revealed that it was the rebels who had fired the first shot back in 1954. But the army were not slow to retaliate. And the counter-insurgency operations had imposed great sufferings on innocent Nagas. To build a road, or a barrack, or a landing strip, villages upon villages were uprooted by the state.

While recognizing the cultural distinctiveness of the Nagas, JP nonetheless urged them to be part of India. He met leaders of the Underground, and advised them to shed their arms and contest elections, and thus take over the administration by peaceful means. For in the federal system the States were free to design and mould their own future. Foreign affairs and defence were in the hands of the Centre, but the things that most mattered—education, health, economic development—were in the control of the States.

The rebels chose not to hear JP. The dream of an independent Nagaland continued to animate them. In the next three decades bouts of war were interspersed with rounds of talks. In the late eighties the Swedish journalist Bertil Lintner travelled in the Naga borderlands. 'India may have its shortcomings and flaws', observed Lintner, these 'often easy to detect and easier still to ridicule. But it remains a strong democracy where criticism as a concept is officially tolerated and the government flexible when a situation demands it. The Nagaland press possesses an extraordinary freedom which has no equivalent in any other Asian war zone. The local press contained detailed reports of rebel ambushes and even underground statements from both the NNC and the NSCN... such things would be unthinkable in Burma...'

Lintner gave the rebels the same advice as JP: to accept and deepen provincial autonomy. As he put it, 'the Nagas in India have managed to get from the Indian government exactly what Rangoon denies its national minorities: a separate state with a high degree of self-government, aid from the centre and the right to preserve their own customs and culture'.

JP could be seen simply as an Indian do-gooder; but Lintner was an authority on insurgency in South-east Asia. His words carried weight; and, at last, they have apparently been listened to. For a couple of years ago, the main rebel group, the NSCN (I-M), declared a cease-fire, and commenced talks with New Delhi. No final agreement has yet been arrived at, but there have been some significant attempts at reconciliation. One such was the visit to India of the self-exiled leaders of the movement, Isaac Swu and T. Muivah. Another was the recent visit to Nagaland of the Indian Prime Minister.

Speaking at a public meeting in Kohima, Mr Vajpayee offered the Nagas money, and work. The Centre, he said, would spend Rs 500 crores in the state over the next two years, thus creating 25,000 new jobs. This is welcome, but more than money the Nagas want honour. One suggestion, offered by the respected columnist B. G. Verghese, is for the Indian Government to recognize the state's unique culture and history, by issuing passports to 'Naga Indians'. Some such gesture is called for, if only to assure the young that the struggle and sacrifice of their elders has not wholly been in vain.

## THE LOCALITY AND THE NATION

On Independence Day this year I was driving from Bangalore to the small temple town of Melkote. At traffic lights within the city we were hailed by vendors selling the National Flag. When we got to the highway, we passed boys on motor bikes waving the tiranga jhanda. Clearly, the Supreme Court order allowing private citizens to display the flag has had a cathartic effect. Bikes, cars, tourist buses—that day all had jhandas, big and small, made from eco-friendly cloth or out of polluting plastic.

These displays of middle-class patriotism were interesting, but more interesting still was what we found when we left the main road to Mysore. After the town of Mandya we turned right. For the next hour-and-a-half we drove through a well-watered countryside. At one crossing we came young men on cycles, handkerchiefs in mouth as they raced along the road. Following them was an ambulance. This was not the Tour de France, yet, judging by the looks on the competitors' faces and at the assembled crowd, it was a race looked forward to as eagerly, and competed for with a comparable intensity.

For the rural folk of Karnataka, as for its townspeople, the 15th of August is a day for celebration and commemoration, an occasion to enjoy as much as to remember. Shortly before we reached Melkote we passed a bullock-cart with a group of little boys in it. This was not in itself an uncommon sight, until one looked at how the boys were dressed. One wore a suit and clasped a book; a second wore a loin-cloth but was bare-bodied, chest upwards; a third wore a tightly buttoned-up tunic and had a turban on his head. Fortunately, one of my companions was a scholar who had grown up in the area, and was thus able to decode what the apparel represented.. As we passed the cart he observed: 'Ambedkar, Gandhi, Visvesvarayya: when I was in school we would have had the other two, but not Ambedkar'.

I do not own a camera, and in fact do not know how to use one. Normally this does not matter, since a historian deals for the most part with people who are dead. And in any case for this column I can draw upon the The Hindu's magnificent photo library. But that day I wished I had a camera with me. Even if I couldn't use it one of my fellow travellers would have known how to. I cannot therefore bring you a picture of those boys in the bullock-cart. But I can try still to suggest what the picture I saw said.

When we passed the cart it was close to eleven o'clock in the morning. The boys were very likely returning from a school function, where they had taken part in a play or fancy dress parade, this after having sung Jana Gana Mana and hoisted the National Flag. That one boy was dressed up as Gandhi was scarcely a surprise. For the Mahatma did more than anyone else to

help bring about our political freedom. He united Indians of different castes and religions, and inspired them in three major movements against colonial rule. On this anniversary of the end of the British Raj, one had thus first to remember the 'Father of the Nation' which has come to replace it.

That another boy was dressed up as Mokshagundam Visvesvarayya was not surprising either. For 'Sir M. V.' (as he was known) is a legendary figure in these parts. As Chief Minister and Dewan of Mysore, he helped make this princely state a beacon of progress, in vivid contrast to its decadent and backward counterparts. Visvesvarayya built schools, railways, industries, and, above all, canals. It was he who supervised the network of canals that runs through the Mandya and Mysore districts, a network that has dramatically transformed a previously arid and dearth-prone area. Till the early twentieth century, the peasants of Mandya were illiterate and unorganized. With the aid of Kaveri water they became prosperous. Education followed, and then, political ambition.

For some decades now the Vokkaligas of the Mandya-Mysore belt have exercised a dominant hold over Karnataka politics. This is an outcome Sir M. V. could not have foreseen, although without him (or his work) it would not have come about. Little wonder that they venerate him here, that they put up his portrait in their homes, and speak of him in their schools.

Gandhi is a figure of national importance; Visvesvarayya an authentically 'local' hero. Till the 1980s these were the two icons the people of Mandya chose to remember on Independence Day. Now they have been joined by a third. The celebration of Ambedkar is a consequence of the assertiveness of the Dalit movement in Karnataka. This movement has drawn into its fold students, writers, professionals and politicians. Through it the Dalits have come to acquire a dignity and pride that is unprecedented but by no means overdue. In past times, they and their leaders were mocked both by Brahmins and by dominant peasant castes such as the Vokkaligas. That schoolchildren can now openly pay tribute to Ambedkar is a sign of how much this has changed.

The historian cannot fail to notice that the 'holy trinity' of Mandya heroes diverged from one another on some key social issues. Visvesvarayya and Gandhi famously disagreed on the path of economic development independent India should follow. The engineer exhorted: 'Industrialize—or Perish!'. The Mahatma answered: 'Industralize—and Perish!'. Gandhi and Ambedkar had a long and inconclusive argument on how best to eradicate the evil of Untouchability. Gandhi thought one could get rid of it and still save Hinduism; Ambedkar believed that the only hope for the Dalits was to take themselves to another religion. While (so far as I know) Ambedkar and Visvesvararraya never met, had they done so they would surely have disagreed on the question of reservation for low castes, which one cautiously supported, and the other emphatically rejected.

If, indeed, these are the three Indians most revered in modern Mysore, then the curious thing is that not one is a native of the region. Gandhi was a Gujarati, Ambedkar a Maharashtrian. And

although Visvesvarayya was born in the Kolar District, his first language and mother tongue was Telugu, not Kannada.

I like to think that the anointing of these three ‘outsiders’ as heroes is characteristic of the inclusive spirit of the Carnatic Plateau. This is a soil that has proved inhospitable to chauvinism. Consider that Melkote, my ultimate destination that day, was a village rescued from obscurity by the migration there of the eleventh century saint-teacher Ramanujacharya, fleeing persecution by Saivite rulers in what is now Tamil Nadu. The locals gave him refuge, and honour. Ramanuja repayed this by showing some broad-mindedness of his own, notably by admitting Dalits to his temple.

Politicians and ideologues demand that we choose among our heroes. They do not permit the co-existence in our pantheon of such combinations as Tilak and Gokhale, Gandhi and Ambedkar, Gandhi and Nehru, Nehru and Patel, Gandhi and Bose, Gandhi and Bhagat Singh. But the truth is that these individuals were all patriots of an unusual intelligence and integrity. While they lived they might have disagreed on this subject or that. But now, long after they are gone, surely one can celebrate them collectively, without setting up oppositions that may have had some meaning in their time but none in ours? In this regard, we urban intellectuals could take some salutary lessons from the villagers of Mandya.

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### **PUBLIC-SPIRITED INDIANS**

Recently, in the course of a single week, I met two Indians of very different professional and personal backgrounds, yet committed to the same goal—getting all of India’s children into school. Jean Dreze is an economist of Belgian extraction, who has lived in this country for more than two decades. He took his Ph D at the Indian Statistical Institute in New Delhi, and later taught at the Delhi School of Economics. Mohandas Pai is a chartered accountant, originally from the Konkan coast, but who grew up in Bangalore. Here he ran his own consultancy firm before joining Infosys in 1994, where he is now Chief Financial Officer.

Dreze I have known for a long time, but sadly (for me) our conversations have been few and far between. This is chiefly because I am a man of the city, and he of the countryside. He is an outstanding fieldworker, who probably knows the villages of India better than any purely ‘desi’ social scientist. By foot or on bicycle he has toured much of Northern India. He is also a superb analytical economist. His understanding and learning are on display in the books *Hunger* and *Public Action and India: Development and Participation*, both written in collaboration with Amartya Sen.

In the last weeks of 2000 Dreze and I were both in Orissa. Except that I was in the state capital, Bhubaneswar, while he was engaged in a walking tour through the tribal district of Kashipur. And although I go to Delhi often he always seems to be somewhere else. However, late last year I was in Delhi, and Dreze, unusually, was in town. We arranged to meet, but then he mailed to tell me he could not come, as he was occupied at the Belgian Embassy. He had been told that his long pending application for Indian citizenship had been granted. But the Belgians refused to believe that he was serious about relinquishing their nationality. They finally let him go only after he had produced a mountain of supporting documents.

Given this history of near-misses, I was delighted when Dreze called to say that he and his wife Bela Bhatia were in Bangalore. Bela I knew to be a considerable character herself. I had admired her essays on the political economy of water in Gujarat—a state where she had spent years as a social activist—and had just finished reading her excellent Ph D dissertation on agrarian conflict in Central Bihar.

When Dreze phoned, I naturally dropped what I was doing and went over to meet Bela and him. We spent the morning together, talking about their ongoing campaign for the right to food. The economist had helped the Peoples Union for Civil Liberties draft a public interest petition to the Supreme Court, which urged that part of the excess grain held in government godowns be used to supply food to schoolchildren. In November 2001, the Court passed an interim order directing all states to introduce cooked mid-day meals in Government and Government-aided schools. As a follow-up, Dreze was now travelling around the country to put pressure on state governments to administer the order fairly and effectively. For there is wide variation in the scheme's implementation. As Dreze points out, 'in Uttar Pradesh alone, about half a million children die every year for lack of basic health and nutrition services of a kind that is widely available in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This is nothing short of implicit mass murder'.

Dreze I am honoured to call a friend, but Mohandas Pai I have met precisely twice. The first time was at a party where I was introduced as one who was writing a history of independent India. 'I hope you will then properly criticize Jawaharlal Nehru', said Pai. 'To the contrary', I replied, 'I shall properly defend him'. That started a lively argument, later carried on over email. This revealed large areas of disagreement—with regard to Nehru's foreign policy and cultural policy, for example—but also one fundamental agreement—with regard to education. The neglect of primary education was, in retrospect, Nehru's most notable failure. In 1947, India had skilled and honest ministers, capable and fair-minded administrators, and a vast reservoir of energetic activists who had partaken of the idealism and self-sacrifice of the national movement. At Independence, we had, in sum, the social capital to wipe out illiteracy. What was lacking was the necessary push from the political leadership.

Within Karnataka, Mohandas Pai has been a vocal advocate of the mid-day meals scheme. He has pressed upon the state government to give it more emphasis, and to extend its operations beyond the seven northern districts where it is currently being implemented. Pai is also actively



involved with a programme run by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, which supplies food to 230 schools in and around Bangalore. One morning he took me to the ISKCON headquarters in the city, where we had the scheme explained to us through a PowerPoint presentation made by two gentle swamis with IIT degrees. We were shown the clean and modern kitchen where, in huge vats, rice and sambaar was cooked for distribution to 43,000 schoolchildren. The kids who benefit from the scheme are Hindus of all castes, as well as Muslims and Christians.

Like Jean Dreze, Mohandas Pai sees a successful countrywide mid-day meals programme as perhaps the key to the universalization of education. By providing a healthy cooked meal at lunchtime, it induces parents to send their kids to school and to keep them there. This is particularly important in the case of Dalit families, and with respect to girls, who tend not to be sent to school or to be withdrawn too early. And, of course, the programme would be a productive way of dispensing of grain now rotting in the godowns of the Food Corporation of India.

In character and background Jean Dreze and Mohandas Pai could not be more opposed. One grew up as a cosmopolitan European, the other was raised in a traditional South Indian Brahmin home. One is an academic who lives austere—perhaps too austere—the other a corporate whiz. One is agnostic, the other religious. One is gentle and introverted, the other effusive and articulate—perhaps even opinionated. But forget these differences—remember only that the two are united by their deep patriotism, and their practical focus on the rights of India's poor children.

Dreze and Pai are both in their early forties, which must make them the youngest individuals ever to be featured in this column (cricketers only excepted). Without diminishing their singularity or their achievement, I would still like to see them as each carrying forward an old and honourable tradition. Behind the wispy frame of Jean Dreze lies a long line of foreign-born fighters for the Indian poor. His precursors include C. F. Andrews, 'Deenbandhu', who worked tirelessly for the rights of indentured labour; Verrier Elwin, the self-appointed yet uniquely effective spokesperson for the Indian adivasi; and Laurie Baker, the Quaker architect who designed so many low-cost and elegant homes for the people of his adopted Kerala. And behind the thick-set and bearded visage of Mohandas Pai lies a long line of socially sensitive industrialists. Think thus of the Tatas of Bombay, of the Sarabhais of Ahmedabad, and, not least, of the other software billionaires of Pai's hometown and mine, Bangalore.

Courageous and public-spirited scholars, as well as courageous and public-spirited businessmen—heaven knows that India needs them both.

## BIOGRAPHIES

### A Writer Among His People

Last week, the novelist, essayist, and polemicist U. R. Ananthamurthy turned eighty. His Bangalore home is named ‘Suragi’, after a flower that retains its fragrance even after it has aged and dried up. Some might find the name self-regarding; but then Ananthamurthy is a man with much to be immodest about. His novels *Samskara* and *Bharathipura* redefined the terrain of modern Indian literature. His newspaper articles in Kannada have a wide readership. As a legendary teacher of English in Sagar and Mysore, he mentored several generations of writers and scholars.

I was privileged to attend Ananthamurthy’s eightieth birthday party—at his house, the aforementioned ‘Suragi’—as perhaps the lone English-language writer among the critics, teachers, poets, novelists, playwrights, film-makers, photographers and singers of the Kannada country, who had gathered there in celebration and in tribute. A man of charm and generosity, Ananthamurthy has an enormous range of friends, and more than a few enemies—for his intellect and pen, tender and loving one moment, can turn sharp and acidic when confronted with aesthetic or (especially) political views that he does not agree with.

I first met U. R. Ananthamurthy at a conference in Delhi in 1989, held to mark the centenary of the birth of Jawaharlal Nehru. A mutual friend, the critic T. G. Vaidyanathan, had asked me to go up and introduce myself. At that stage, I had not published a single book, while Ananthamurthy was already a towering figure in the world of letters. Given the asymmetry in our stature, I was hesitant, but in those days I followed TGV’s word (and wish) implicitly. ‘Vaidya’, said Ananthamurthy, when I told him of the person who connected us, and then, again, ‘Vaidya’, pressing my hand more firmly in his, the voice and the gesture making it clear that any friend of ‘TGV’ would be his friend, too.

That early encounter alerted me to the man’s spontaneity and warmth, but also to his writerly way with names. A man who was TGV to his followers and rivals alike was ‘Vaidya’ to him. Everyone calls me Ram, but to Ananthamurthy alone I have always been ‘Guha’. It must have been this desire to dissent from the horde, apart from a proper concern with placing place names in their local context, that led Ananthamurthy to lead the (since successful) movement to have Bangalore renamed Bengaluru.

Years later, when I reminded Ananthamurthy of where and how I met him, he said that in his youth he intensely disliked Nehru. He had been a shishya of the firebrand socialist Ram Manohar Lohia, who saw India’s first Prime Minister as an upper-caste, Anglicized, neo-colonialist, unfit to represent Indian culture or the Indian people. Lohia died in 1967; twenty years later, following the Ayodhya movement and the riots that came in its wake, his disciple realized that in one crucial respect—the fostering of religious harmony—Nehru was in fact a more reliable disciple of the Mahatma than the other leaders of the freedom movement. I met Ananthamurthy,

therefore, at a time of transition. In 1969 or 1979 he may not have attended a conference in memory of Nehru, but by 1989 he saw some reason to do so.

This willingness to modify his beliefs and prejudices in view of fresh evidence, was characteristic of the man. From that first, affectionate handshake—done Indian style, with us standing side by side, my palm in his, rather than hands extended out, stiffly and formally in the Western manner—I sensed that Ananthamurthy was different from the intellectual gurus I had known in Calcutta and Delhi. Despite his awards and distinctions—the Jnanpith, the Padma Bhushan, the Presidentship of the Sahitya Akademi—he never talked down to you; he listened as much as he spoke; and he welcomed argument and dissent, especially from those younger than himself.

In 1994 I moved to Bangalore. Here, I met and befriended the brilliant critic D. R. Nagaraj, who told me a story about his mentor. After some ten years of intense learning from Ananthamurthy, Nagaraj was told: ‘I have taught you all I know. Now I must send you to Delhi to learn from Ashis Nandy’. So Ananthamurthy arranged for his disciple to be awarded a fellowship at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, where he spent some creative and most fulfilling years.

I had myself come to Bangalore from Delhi; and knew Ashis Nandy. While I admired his writings, it struck me that he was incapable of telling one of his students: ‘I have taught you all I know. Now I must send you to Bangalore to learn from Ananthamurthy’. To be fair, Nandy was not exceptional—others among our academic dasas have exactly the same proprietorial attitude towards their students and the same sense of infallibility as regards their ideas.

In 1998, when Nagaraj died, still in his forties, Ananthamurthy was inconsolable. ‘He was both my guru and my shishya’, he said. It was to younger writers such as Nagaraj, Devanur Mahadeva, and Siddalangaiah that Ananthamurthy owed his interest in Dalit literature and activism.

Since our first meeting in JNU, I have met the owner of ‘Suragi’ on about twenty occasions, mostly in Bangalore, but also in Manipal, Moscow, and the hamlet of Heggodu in north-western Karnataka, where his friend, the late K. V. Subbanna, started an annual culture workshop now run by Subbanna’s son Akshara, at which Ananthamurthy is the reigning presence and presiding (if self-acknowledgedly fallible) deity. From most conversations with him I have taken away an insight or two about politics and social life in India. It was from Ananthamurthy, for example, that I learnt that the Indian writer is luckier than his Western counterpart, for he lives simultaneously in the 12th and 21st centuries, and in every century in-between. It was also Ananthamurthy who told me that we must never cede the lovely colour saffron to the bigots on the right.

About ten years ago, Ananthamurthy left Bangalore to take up a visiting professorship in Manipal. But he kept returning often. I joked to my wife that I always knew when the famous

writer was on his way back from the coast to the capital. The newspapers would report his progress, day by day—a book released in Manipal, a talk delivered in Bantwal, a meeting of environmental activists addressed in Sakleshpur, a literary festival inaugurated in Hassan. That, probably, was the last stop, since while Ananthamurthy would have given wonderfully appropriate speeches on all the occasions itemized above, one could not really see the old socialist being welcomed at the Kunigal Stud Farm.

I knew, from appearing with my friend at functions in Bangalore, that the camera follows him everywhere—with a rush of people seeking to get close to Ananthamurthy, for his will always be the centre of the frame. I was thus teasing him (in absentia), but my tease also conveyed admiration, and even envy. For no man now alive in India better deserves the term ‘public intellectual’ than Ananthamurthy. And maybe only one woman—the similarly ageless and indomitable Mahasweta Devi. Certainly no English writer in India has anywhere like the social standing of Ananthamurthy, the deep, lifelong, connection with his readers and his public. When one of my tribe dies, his passing may (just possibly) be noticed in the bar of the India International Centre. When Ananthamurthy meets his Maker, his writings and his legacy will be discussed and debated in every district of Karnataka.

(published in The Telegraph, 29th December 2012)

### **Appreciating Nehru**

The most admired human being on the planet may be a one-time boxer named Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. To spend three decades in prison fighting racial oppression, and then guide and oversee the peaceful transition to a multi-racial democracy, surely ranks as the greatest personal achievement since the end of the Second World War.

For the capaciousness of his vision and the generosity of his spirit, Nelson Mandela has sometimes been compared to Mahatma Gandhi. Like Gandhi, Mandela is both a reconciling figure and a universal figure, admired across the social spectrum in his own land and in other lands too. There are also odd personal details that bind them: Mandela was a friend of Gandhi’s second son Manilal, Mandela and Gandhi were both lawyers, Mandela and Gandhi both lived in Johannesburg, Mandela and Gandhi were both incarcerated in that city’s Fort Prison. This prison now houses South Africa’s Constitutional Court, on whose premises one can find permanent exhibits devoted to the life and example of Mandela and of Gandhi.

Mandela’s comrade Ahmad Kathrada, his fellow prisoner in Robben Island, once asked why he admired Gandhi. Mandela answered: ‘But Nehru was my hero’. To his biographer Anthony Sampson, Mandela explained his preference as follows: ‘When a Maharaja tried to stop him he [Nehru] would push him aside. He was that type of man, and we liked him because his conduct indicated how we should treat our own oppressors. Whereas Gandhi had a spirit of steel, but

nevertheless it was shown in a very gentle and smooth way, and he would rather suffer in humility than retaliate.’

In the 1940s, Mandela closely read Jawaharlal Nehru’s books, including his autobiography. His speeches often quoted from Nehru’s writings. A phrase that particularly resonated was ‘there is no easy walk to freedom anywhere’, used by Mandela in his first major political speech, made in September 1953. Decades later, the phrase found its way into Mandela’s autobiography, whose Nehruvian title is ‘Long Walk to Freedom’.

In 1980, Nelson Mandela was given the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. Since Mandela was in prison, his comrade Oliver Tambo—who had left South Africa to canvass support overseas, while travelling on an Indian passport—came to New Delhi to accept the award on his behalf. ‘Nelson Mandela’s captors may wish to ponder the fact’, remarked Tambo in his speech, ‘that Jawaharlal Nehru, who was no stranger to imprisonment and was in no way destroyed by it, served the world community, including the British, far better as a free man than as a political prisoner. Nelson Mandela’s 18 years’ imprisonment has in no way destroyed him, and will not.’

Jawaharlal Nehru appealed to Mandela and Tambo on account of his political views. As a socialist and modernist, Nehru’s ideas were, to these South African radicals, more congenial than Gandhi’s. But there was also a practical reason for their appreciation; the fact that, as Prime Minister of India, Nehru worked tirelessly to arraign the apartheid regime in the court of world opinion. Thus, as Tambo noted in his speech in New Delhi in 1980, ‘if Mahatma Gandhi started and fought his heroic struggle in South Africa and India, Jawaharlal Nehru was to continue it in Asia, Africa and internationally. In 1946, India broke trade relations with South Africa—the first country to do so. Speaking at the Bandung Conference in April 1955, Jawaharlal Nehru declared: “There is nothing more terrible than the infinite tragedy of Africa in the past few hundred years.”’

Shortly after the Bandung Conference, Jawaharlal Nehru visited the Soviet Union. When he spoke at Moscow University, in the audience was a young law student named Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev. Decades later, Gorbachev recalled the impact Nehru’s speech made on him. ‘Obviously, we [students] were still very far from understanding the principles of democracy’, he wrote in his memoirs: ‘Yet, the simplified black-and-white picture of the world as presented by our propaganda was even then considered rather sceptically by the students. Jawaharlal Nehru’s visit to Moscow in June 1955 was an unexpected stimulus for me in this respect. ... This amazing man, his noble bearing, keen eyes and warm and disarming smile, made a deep impression on me’.

Thirty years after hearing Nehru speak in Moscow, Gorbachev helped bring about a peaceful end to the Cold War while permitting a transition to democracy in Eastern Europe. Unlike Soviet rulers in 1956, 1968 and 1979, he did not send troops into Soviet satellites whose people wanted

an end to Stalinist one-party regimes. It appears the early exposure to Jawaharlal Nehru played at least some part in the reformist and reconciling politics of the mature Gorbachev.

I quote these appreciations for three reasons: because they are little-known, because Mandela and Gorbachev are both considerable figures, and because their admiration runs counter to the widespread disapprobation of Nehru among large sections of India's youth, middle-class, and intelligentsia.

Greatly admired within India during his lifetime, Nehru witnessed a precipitous fall in his reputation after his death. This accelerated in the 1980s and 1990s, when his ideas on the economy, on foreign affairs, and on social harmony all came under sharp attack. There was a vigorous campaign to free entrepreneurs from all forms of state control and regulation; a major, countrywide movement to redefine Indian secularism by making it more 'Hindu' in theory and practice; and a clamour from the media and business elite to abandon India's non-alignment in favour of an ever closer relationship with the United States.

India has experimented now with twenty years of anti-Nehruvian policies in economics, social affairs, and foreign policy. These radical shifts have shown mixed results. Creative capitalism is being increasingly subordinated to crony capitalism; aggressive Hindutva has led to horrific riots and the loss of many lives; and the United States has not shown itself to be as willing to accommodate India's interests as our votaries of a special relationship had hoped.

Among reflective Indians, there is a sense that these decades of Nehru-bashing have been somewhat counterproductive. It is true that Nehru was excessively suspicious of entrepreneurs, yet some form of state regulation is still required in a complex and unequal society. His ideas of religious and linguistic pluralism remain entirely relevant, or else India would become a Hindu Pakistan. And it suits India's interests to have good relations with all major powers—China, the European Union, Russia, and the United States—rather than hitch its wagon to the US alone.

Nehru's respect for democratic procedure, his inclusive social vision, and his independent foreign policy all remain relevant. Other aspects of his legacy are more problematic: these include his neglect of primary education, his lack of interest in military matters, and his scepticism of political decentralization. However, a balanced appreciation of Nehru's legacy—its positive and its negative aspects—is inhibited by the fact that the ruling Congress Party is controlled so closely by individuals related to him and who claim to speak in his name.

In a recent interview to *The Hindu*, Nayantara Sahgal pointed out that it was Indira Gandhi who created the 'Nehru-Gandhi' dynasty, not her father. This is absolutely true. In a book published in 1960, the editor Frank Moraes (by this time a sharp critic of the Prime Minister) wrote that 'there is no question of Nehru's attempting to create a dynasty of his own; it would be inconsistent with his character and career'. When Nehru died in 1964, another bitter critic, D. F. Karaka, nonetheless praised his resolve 'not to indicate any preference with regard to his

successor. This, [Nehru] maintained, was the privilege of those who were left behind. He himself was not concerned with that issue’.

Living outside India, insulated in their daily lives from the consequences of the deeds or misdeeds of Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi, Sanjay Gandhi, Sonia Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi, both Nelson Mandela and Mikhail Gorbachev could appreciate the sagacity and moral depth of Nehru’s political vision. We who live in India are however inhibited from doing so by the unfortunate accident whereby control of our most powerful political party has passed on to Nehru’s descendants.

(published in The Hindu, 13th November 2012)

### **Sonia’s Rise**

In Zareer Masani’s recent memoir of his parents, *And All is Said*, he quotes a letter written to him by his mother in 1968. ‘Yesterday we went to Mrs Pandit’s reception for Rajiv Gandhi and his wife’, wrote Shakuntala Masani, adding: ‘I can’t tell you how dim she is, and she comes from a working-class family. I really don’t know what he saw in her’.

When *And All is Said* was widely reviewed, when it was published, no reviewer seems to have picked up on this comment. Shakuntala Masani was the daughter of Sir J. P. Srivastava, once one of the most influential men in India, an industrialist with wide business interests and a member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council besides. Shakuntala’s husband, Minoo Masani, was a well educated Parsi from a family of successful professionals, who was himself a leading politician and writer. By upbringing and marriage Shakuntala Masani was a paid-up member of the Indian elite. Hence the condescending remarks about the working-class Italian whom Rajiv Gandhi had chosen as his wife.

The object of Mrs Masani’s contempt has, for some time now, been the most powerful person in India. How did she achieve that power, and what has she done with it? Sonia Gandhi’s rise in politics has been at least as unlikely as Barack Obama’s. Moving to Cambridge to learn English (but not at the university), she met and fell in love with Rajiv Gandhi. He brought her to India, where she lived a life of quiet domesticity, bringing up her children and attending to her husband. Through the turmoil of the 1970s, through the Emergency and its aftermath, Rajiv Gandhi stayed well out of politics. His stated ambition, at this stage, was to be promoted from flying Avros between Delhi and Lucknow to piloting Boeings on the more prestigious Delhi-Bombay run.

Indira Gandhi’s political heir was her second son, Sanjay. In 1980 Sanjay died in a flying accident, and the mother pressed Rajiv to take his place. He was reluctant, his wife even more so. Sonia did not want Rajiv to join politics, and begged him not to take office as Prime Minister

when his mother was assassinated in 1984. When he yielded to the clamour of his party colleagues, however, Sonia assumed the decorous, and decorative, role of a Prime Minister's wife.

When Rajiv Gandhi was assassinated in 1991 the Congress asked his widow to lead the party. She declined, and went into seclusion. Politics had cost her beloved husband his life; she would have none of it. But after the Congress lost power in 1996 the chamchas began pleading with her once more. In 1998 she finally agreed to take charge as Congress President.

When Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister in 1966 the Socialist leader Ram Manohar Lohia dismissed her as a gungi goodiya, a dumb doll. Sonia Gandhi was likewise taken less than seriously by her political opponents—who, like Shakuntala Masani, thought her dim, uneducated, a woman of no substance. Like her mother-in-law, Sonia rose to the challenge. She travelled around the country, putting life in the state units of the Congress. By her energy and determination she was able to bring her party to power in many states, and, in 2004, at the Centre.

Sonia Gandhi's achievement in rescuing the Congress from what appeared to be terminal decline was proof of her political skills, and of her personal courage. She had faced a barrage of abuse from her opponents, who—in a desperate appeal to the baser, xenophobic instincts of her fellow Indians—claimed that if the Congress was voted to power she would bring in 'Rome Raj'.

The Congress has now been in power for eight years. The Hindu right continues to target Sonia Gandhi as a foreigner. Her Italian birth is to them the prime reason why the UPA Government is illegitimate. There is a curious organization called the World Association of Hindu Scholars, composed largely of NRI and OCI academics who make sneering remarks about Sonia Gandhi's foreign origins, while simultaneously boasting about the Western degrees they have and the Western institutions they are affiliated with. A more weighty individual who persistently rakes up Mrs Gandhi's Italian and Catholic origins is the Gujarat Chief Minister, Mr Narendra Modi. When the Central Government announced that it would open up the retail trade to foreign investment, Mr Modi asked the Prime Minister how many Italian businessmen he intended to please, how many Indian jobs he intended to give away to Italians. These were contemptible remarks, not least because there are other (and weightier) reservations that one may have about the coming in of Walmart into India.

I have never met Sonia Gandhi. But I have little doubt of her patriotism. The evidence suggests that she has accepted this country completely. The problem with Sonia Gandhi's politics is not her foreign birth, but her worship of her Indian family. She venerates Indira Gandhi, and is fanatically devoted to the memory of Rajiv Gandhi. Her politics and policies are determined chiefly by these sentiments, to the detriment of good governance and of the long-term future of the Congress Party itself.



Love of one's kin, that very Indian trait, has also persuaded Sonia Gandhi that her son Rahul is destined to become Prime Minister. When the first UPA Government assumed office in 2004, the allies, recognizing that the electorate was now mostly composed of people under thirty, gave the Cabinet posts allotted to them to younger leaders such as Ambumani Ramadoss and Dayanidhi Maran. The Congress, on the other hand, placed septuagenarians like Arjun Singh and Shivraj Patel in key portfolios.

Towards the end of the UPA's first term, a few young Congress leaders were made Ministers of State. They have continued in these junior positions for the past four years. It is overwhelmingly likely that this is because Sonia Gandhi fears that if any one of them was made Cabinet Minister, and performed well in that position, this would reflect badly on her son. Since Rahul Gandhi is not yet ready to become a Cabinet Minister no other young Congressman can become a Cabinet Minister either.

Then there is Sonia Gandhi's deep devotion to the memory of her dead husband. Congress leaders wishing to ingratiate themselves with their Leader know that the best way is to issue a stream of expensive advertisements on Rajiv Gandhi's birthday, name schemes after him, and invite Sonia Gandhi to inaugurate them.

It is at the inauguration of new bridges, airports and the like that Sonia Gandhi's political style becomes most apparent. Under this regime, these projects are often named after Rajiv Gandhi. Even if they are not, Sonia Gandhi will attribute the credit to him. The engineers who built the bridge or airport are never named and rarely thanked; rather, we are told that the bridge or airport is the fulfilment of Rajivji's technology-driven vision for India. I cannot recall whether Sonia Gandhi has ever attended a successful satellite launch organised by ISRO; but if she were, doubtless there too the nation will be told that it all happened because of Rajiv Gandhi.

This obsession has wounded the pride and self-respect of the ordinary Indians who design and execute such projects. And it has cost her party dearly too. Thus the Congress campaign for the Gujarat elections began with promise to women voters that they would get loans for houses if their party won. The scheme was named for Rajiv Gandhi; whereas a smarter (as well as more honourable move) would have been to name it after Vallabhbhai Patel, a great Gujarati who was also a lifelong Congressman.

Not her alleged lack of intelligence, nor her alleged lack of patriotism, but her excessive and often unreasoning devotion to her family is Sonia Gandhi's great flaw. She cannot allow that there may be Congressmen under fifty who are more capable and more intelligent than her son; or that any political leader other than Rajiv or Indira Gandhi ever did anything worthwhile for the nation.

(published in The Telegraph, 3rd November 2012)

## **The Greatest Living Gandhian**

When Dr Manmohan Singh went to call on Aung San Suu Kyi earlier this week, I wonder whether the great Burmese lady recalled her first encounter with India and Indians. In the 1950s, as a young teenager, she moved to Delhi with her mother, who had been appointed Burma's Ambassador to India. The years she spent in our country were absolutely formative to her intellectual (and moral) evolution. As Peter Popham writes in his recent *The Lady and the Peacock: The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi*: 'Intellectually, moving to India proved to be a crucial step for Suu. In the Indian capital she discovered at first hand what a backwater she had been born and raised in, and began to learn how a great civilisation, which had been under the thumb of the imperialists far longer than Burma, had not lost its soul in the process, but rather had discovered new modes of feeling and expression that were a creative blend of Indian tradition and the modernity the British brought with them.'

After taking her first degree at Delhi University, Suu Kyi moved to Oxford for further studies. There she was courted by some very articulate Indians, but in the end settled on a quiet and contemplative Englishman named Michael Aris. Aris was a scholar of Tibetan Buddhism, devoted to his studies, and to his wife. By all accounts this was a very happy marriage, albeit one where the division of gender roles was utterly conventional. Suu was the housewife and homemaker, Michael the scholar and star. They lived in Oxford, raising two boys, he spending the days in the library, she shopping and cleaning and cooking.

In the 1970s, Michael Aris was invited to the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies (IIAS) in Shimla. Scouring the Institute's library, Suu Kyi renewed her interest in Indian nationalism. In a monograph she wrote for the IIAS, she praised Rammohan Roy, who had 'set the tone for the Indian Renaissance'. Later nationalists ensured that 'social, religious and political aspects of reform should move together.' Of Indian thinkers, Suu Kyi admired Rabindranath Tagore (whose poems and songs she still quotes), and, most of all, Gandhi, who reconciled tradition and modernity in a manner she found most appealing. 'In spite of his deeply ingrained Hinduism', she remarked, 'Gandhi's intellectual flexibility made him accept those elements of western thought which fitted into the ethical and social scheme he considered desirable.'

When Suu and Michael were courting, she wrote him a letter in which she said that, if they married, 'I only ask one thing, that should my people need me, you would help me do my duty by them.' The lines were prophetic. In 1988, Suu Kyi visited Rangoon to see her ailing mother. While she was there, a popular uprising broke out against the military regime. As the daughter of the great nationalist hero Aung San, she was drawn into the struggle, and soon became its symbol and rallying-point. Her subsequent career is well-known: how she led her newly formed party to a landslide victory in the elections of 1990, how instead of honouring that verdict the Generals put her under arrest, how for the next twenty years she was separated from her husband

and sons, while battling a brutal regime with such tenacious courage that she was compared to Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela.

A close friend of hers once remarked that ‘Gandhi is Suu Kyi’s role model and hero.’ In his book, Popham picks up on this point, comparing his subject repeatedly with the Mahatma. Her tours through the Burmese countryside were inspired by Gandhi’s travels through India after his return from South Africa. Popham says of her opposition to armed resistance that ‘the moral advantage Suu possessed, like Gandhi and Martin Luther King in other times and places, was that she and her followers would never meet violence with violence.’

The comparison is natural, not forced. As I see it, there are at least six respects in which Suu Kyi’s career parallels that of the Mahatma: (1) A leavening of politics with morality, which comes in both cases from a religious faith which is devout without being dogmatic; (2) A commitment to non-violence in word and in deed; (3) A willingness to reach out to one’s rivals and opponents; (4) An openness to ideas and innovations from other cultures; (5) An utter fearlessness, with death holding no dangers for them; (6) Great personal charm, a feature of which is a sense of humour.

However, while Aung San Suu Kyi can certainly be compared to Gandhi, she cannot (as she perhaps would be the first to acknowledge) be equated to him. Gandhi came first, crafting the techniques of non-violent resistance of which Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, and Aung San Suu Kyi have been such outstanding exemplars. Besides, Gandhi’s range of interests (and obsessions) was far greater.

India is much larger than Burma, and much more diverse in linguistic and religious terms. Gandhi lived and died for Hindu-Muslim harmony, but we know little of how Suu Kyi intends to stem Buddhist chauvinism in Myanmar by giving greater respect to Muslims, tribals and other minorities. India is a far more hierarchical society than Myanmar; so can be no real parallel in Suu Kyi’s life to Gandhi’s lifelong struggle against untouchability. And Gandhi was also an precocious environmentalist.

That said, Suu Kyi is far closer to Gandhi, and a much better Gandhian, than any Indian now living. Indians who currently claim to speak in Gandhi’s name include the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh (whose inaugural speech in May 2004 committed his Government to Gandhi’s talisman to think always of the poorest of the poor); Sonia Gandhi, whose connection to the Mahatma is as President of a Party he built and to which he owed a life-long allegiance; and Anna Hazare, whose cheerleaders regularly and repeatedly claim to be the next Gandhi.

Compared to this Burmese heroine, these are all nakli Gandhians. As one colleague in the democracy movement recalled, Suu Kyi’s skill as a leader is that ‘she never takes the upper hand, she never uses her family background to dominate.’ One wishes one could say the same thing about Sonia Gandhi. Again, Suu Kyi’s quiet, understated, personality, her calm dignity, her expansive intellectual vision—these are in sharp contrast to the spitefulness of tone, the love of

publicity, the limited horizons, of Anna Hazare. And her steely courage, her decisiveness in times of crisis, stand at the other extreme from the timidity and pusillanimity of the Indian Prime Minister.

In terms of position, there was a profound asymmetry between the two who shook hands this past Tuesday. One was the Prime Minister of the world's largest democracy, the other a powerless Member of Parliament in a mid-sized country which is erratically and episodically emerging from authoritarian rule. In terms of moral standing, of course, the asymmetry runs in the reverse direction. It is probably too much to hope that by shaking his hand and dignifying him with an appointment, Suu Kyu might have transferred a small amount of courage to her visitor.

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### **States Of The Nation**

General Elections are all-India affairs, with citizens in twenty-eight states taking part to elect a new Parliament. On the other hand, elections to Legislative Assemblies have a particular resonance for the citizens of the state, or states, going to the polls. Some state elections, however, are of national significance. The first such was the Kerala elections of 1957, when the ruling Congress Party was defeated by the Communist Party of India (CPI). Earlier in the same decade, the Communists had launched an armed insurrection against the Indian state, seeking to replace it with a one-party dictatorship. They gave up arms and came overground to fight the first General Elections, held in 1952. This the Congress comfortably won, but the CPI emerged as the single largest Opposition party in the Lok Sabha.

Their victory in Kerala in 1957 consolidated the Communists' image as the only serious challenger to Congress hegemony. This may have been why a coalition of anti-Communist forces—the Catholic Church, the Nair Service Society, and the Congress Party itself—organized mass protests against a legally elected government, whereupon it was dismissed by the Centre. In the mid-term elections, held in 1960, the Congress regained power in Kerala.

Till Jawaharlal Nehru's death the Congress held sway all across the country. In the General Elections of 1967, the first held with no Nehru to lead their campaign, India's oldest political party still won power at the Centre. But they were routed in Tamil Nadu (then known as Madras), where the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam won a comfortable majority, riding a wave of anti-Congress, anti-Central Government, and anti-North Indian sentiment provoked by an attempt by New Delhi to impose Hindi by administrative fiat. This was the Congress's most decisive defeat (it had long considered Madras a stronghold), but in 1967 it also lost power to an alliance of dissident Congressmen and Communists in West Bengal, and to other anti-Congress coalitions in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Orissa. It was now said, with some

wonder and astonishment, that one could travel all the way from Delhi to Howrah and not pass through a single Congress-ruled state.

These losses in 1967 prompted a major reorientation in the Congress. The Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, previously not known for her strong political convictions, now repositioned herself as a socialist. She nationalized the banks, abolished the privy purses, and called an early General Election, campaigning under the stirring slogan of 'Garibi Hatao'! This allowed the Congress to win a massive majority at the Centre, and also to recapture several State Assemblies in the north and east.

Indira Gandhi's victory at the polls in January 1971 was followed by an equally emphatic victory on the battle-field in the last month of the same year. Some credit for the independence of Bangladesh accrued to the Mukti Bahini, some to the Indian Army, but much, or even most, was reserved for the Indian Prime Minister, who showed her human side in providing a home for millions of refugees and her political side in provoking a war she knew her side would win. These twin victories imbued her with a sense of arrogance, and even invulnerability. In the past the Congress was supposed to have a divine right to rule; now that right, she thought, had passed on to a single family. She was wrong—for, in the next General Elections, held in 1977, the Congress was trounced in the Centre and in many northern states as well.

The next state elections to have a national significance were held in 1983. In that year, the Congress lost power for the first time in Karnataka. More striking still was its loss in Andhra Pradesh, where too it had hitherto been undefeated. Now, after an insult levelled at the state's Chief Minister by Rajiv Gandhi, a famous film star named N. T. R. Rama Rao started a party to restore Telugu pride, damaged by decades of Congress misrule. His Telugu Desam Party had no history, no organization, no money, no real ideology even. No one, least of all the English-language media, gave it a ghost of a chance. In the event, the charisma (and energy) of a single man was enough to overcome the money, history, and organizational power of the Congress Party. This was arguably the most spectacular defeat the Congress had suffered; for its previous conquerors, such as the Communists, the DMK and the Janata Party, were all led by experienced politicians who had a solid cadre of co-workers to organize their campaigns.

The elections recently held in Uttar Pradesh are, in this respect, a radical departure from the historical trend. Unlike Kerala in 1957, Tamil Nadu in 1967, West Bengal in 1977, or Andhra Pradesh in 1983, in this case the Congress entered the polls not as a dominant behemoth but as a party on the margins, seeking desperately to make a comeback in a state where it has had little influence in recent years. The UP elections acquired an added significance because the most important of the younger Congress leaders, Rahul Gandhi, had staked so much on its outcome. He had made it known that he regarded the UP elections of 2012 as a 'semi-final', a prelude to the General Elections currently scheduled for 2014. In the past year Rahul Gandhi had toured through the state, monitored the screening and selection of his party's candidates, and addressed dozens of public meetings himself.

Much was at stake for the other parties as well. The Bharatiya Janata Party had begun its rise to national prominence via Uttar Pradesh; it had been in power in the state episodically in the 1980s and 1990s, but had declined considerably since. If it were to seriously challenge the Congress at the national level it needed to make an impressive show in UP. These elections were crucial for the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party too. The latter was desperate to regain power in the state; the former, to retain power. For both parties, a good performance in these elections would augment its influence at the Centre.

The elections in Uttar Pradesh were arguably among the five most important state elections held since Indian independence. Four parties were deeply invested in the outcome—the BJP and the Congress, for whom a good performance would augur well for their hopes to lead a successful coalition in the next General Elections; and the BSP and the SP, for whom a winning performance would consolidate their position in India's largest state and also allow them to play a more active role in New Delhi.

Such were the expectations of the four major players in the polls. How must each feel now that the results are in? The Samajwadi Party must be very pleased; the other three parties, desperately disappointed. The pleasure and disappointment is collective as well as individual. As an early report on the results had it, 'Yadav scion up, Gandhi scion down.' From late last year, the English-language media had made much of Rahul Gandhi's campaigning in UP, writing extensively—and often breathlessly—of his stays in Dalit homes and his visits to Jat farmers. Meanwhile, Akhilesh Yadav worked steadily away in his home state, rather than make occasional speculative visits from the safety of New Delhi. It was only in the last stages of polling that the press realized that the dehati dynast was making a far greater impact than Rahul Gandhi.

Once the exit polls made clear the extent of the Congress's defeat, the chamchas sought to distance their leader from the result. Digvijay Singh, Salman Khurshid, Renuka Chowdhury, and Rita Bahuguna-Joshi all blamed it on the hapless 'party worker'. To his credit, Rahul Gandhi has accepted that he must take primary responsibility. The results are a massive setback to his party, and to him personally. Already, in states far away from UP, regional leaders such as Jayalalithaa and Mamata Banerjee are seeing in the humiliation of the Congress the possibilities of a Third Front Government in 2014.

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## A MAN TO MATCH HIS MOUNTAINS

The importance of the India International Centre (IIC) in New Delhi is gauged, in part, by the number of armed security men who pass through its portals. These come to accompany—and, one supposes, protect—the big shots, the fat cats, the Ministers and MP's and Ambassadors and Generals who wish to be seen at a place located, in every sense, at the centre of power and influence. These dignitaries come to 'dignify' the talks and seminars and book releases that the IIC plays host to through the year.

Whether substantive or ceremonial, these meetings at the IIC are almost always in English. Very occasionally, however, one hears a talk in Hindi. Such was the case when the writer Nirmal Varma and the philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi were alive; both were regulars at the IIC bar and at the IIC's lecture podium. The memory of Ramu and Nirmal, of the exquisite Hindi they spoke and of the lack of ceremony that accompanied them, were revived in a function held recently at the IIC's auditorium.

The function was ostensibly a book release, to mark the appearance in print of a work entitled 'Parvat Parvat Basti Basti'. But it turned into a celebration of the book's author, the great pioneering environmentalist Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Bhatt is best known for having been (in the words of his fellow Gandhian from Garhwal, Sunderlal Bahuguna) the 'mukhya sanchalak', or chief organizer, of the Chipko movement. As the first major environmental initiative of the poor, the influence and impact of Chipko has resonated down the decades and across the oceans.

Yet Chandi Prasad Bhatt was, or is, more than the founder of Chipko. His contributions have been manifold. He both opposed deforestation and promoted afforestation, motivating women to revegetate hillsides made barren by the careless hand of man. He initiated producers' co-operatives, generating off-farm employment for peasants excessively dependent on the monsoon. He inspired young men and women in Uttarakhand, and beyond, to devote themselves to a life of service. All through, he has displayed a complete indifference to fame or monetary reward. In contemporary India, few people exemplify the Gandhian ideal of disinterested service as nobly as Chandi Prasad Bhatt.

That day at the IIC, Bhatt's example was spoken of by scholars and activists who had the privilege of knowing him over the years. The first speaker was the respected environmental writer Anupam Mishra. Many decades before the publication of 'Parvat Parvat Basti Basti', said Mishra, Chandi Prasad Bhatt wrote a book which contained only one word with three syllables—Chipko. When Chipko started, in 1973, there were no 24/7 news channels. Even newspapers took three or four days to reach the interior of Garhwal. And yet the message of Chipko rapidly spread. The book of one word with three syllables written by Bhatt was to be inscribed across the hills and valleys of the Himalaya, across India, and across the world.

Mishra was followed by Ramesh Pahadi, a senior journalist based in Garhwal. Bhatt, said Pahadi, was generally praised for his work in the environmental field. Few knew, however, that

he was a radical social reformer from long before he founded the Chipko movement. Born in an upper caste home, into a family of temple priests, Bhatt was the first Brahmin in the locality to speak with and eat with Dalits.

The next speaker, Sunita Narain of the Centre for Science and Environment, recalled how she met Chandi Prasad Bhatt through her colleague Anil Agarwal. Chandi Prasad taught Agarwal (and others) that Chipko was not just a fight for protecting forests and environment, but a struggle for protecting and renewing livelihoods. It was a fight for social dignity, and for political emancipation. The call of Chipko, said Sunita Narain, was relevant to the environmental and social conflicts of the present day, those stoked by controversial projects such as Posco and Vedanta.

In medieval times, Chandi Prasad Bhatt's native state of Uttarakhand was divided into the rival chiefdoms of Garhwal and Kumaun. Himself from Garhwal, Bhatt has had an enduring influence on the other side, as narrated by the celebrated Kumauni historian Shekhar Pathak. In 1977, Pathak was jailed for his part in a student protest; not long after his release, Bhatt came knocking on his door. The younger man was then a Marxist firebrand, and suspicious of Gandhian social workers. He was quickly won over by Bhatt, who inspired him to set up collective project of research and documentation that, in the years since, has produced a stream of valuable and often authoritative books and reports on the state—social and natural—of the Himalaya.

Pathak was taught by Bhatt to think of the Himalaya as being more than Mount Everest and Nanda Devi. The Himalaya were also the smaller peaks and hills, and the valleys and hills in between. In the same manner, Bhatt told his younger colleagues that the cadres and silent workers in a social movement were as important as the leaders. Pathak also spoke of Bhatt's wider, pan-Indian vision, as in his travels through Bastar in 1987, which resulted in a precocious warning, outlined in a long letter to Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, that Maoists would gain in influence if tribal concerns were not attended to forthwith.

After his admirers had spoken, Bhatt was given the right of reply. He had, he said, been taught in the Sarvodaya movement that among the things to eschew, apart from drinks, drugs, etc., was the hearing of self-praise. Known now for founding a globally famous social movement, Bhatt recalled his first struggle, back in the late 1950s, which was to stop bus companies in Garhwal from extorting higher rates from pilgrims. The conductors and drivers knew which passenger was from Garhwal and who was from the plains. The former were charged the standard rate; the latter, double or triple that. When Bhatt and his colleagues tried to stop this practice—or malpractice—the bus owners asked, why are you complaining, these passengers are from Kerala and Rajasthan, not from here. This then was his first struggle, a local and unglamorous struggle, albeit a struggle emphasizing his capacious, pan-Indian vision.

'Parvat Parvat Basti Basti' collects Bhatt's essays over four decades. There are essays here on Bastar, the Godavari basin, Arunachal, Kashmir, and the Andamans. There are accounts of his



visits to Latur and Gujarat after the earthquakes in those places. These essays display his deep understanding of society and nature, and of the threats posed by more powerful interests to the lifestyles and environments of rural communities.

Speaking at the IIC, Bhatt said that for him every river was a Ganga, a source of life and renewal, abused or ill-treated at one's peril. His travels around India were for him the work of education (shiksha ka kaam). His own work has been an education for others. For in his own quiet, understated way, Chandi Prasad Bhatt has had a deep influence on very many scientists, scholars, journalists, forest officials, and, not least, younger social workers.

I myself first met Chandi Prasad Bhatt exactly thirty years ago. My encounters with him, and my studies of his work, have had a profound impact on my intellectual evolution. Because of what Bhatt has done, and because of what people like Bhatt (not least his namesake Ela of Ahmedabad) can do, I do not despair altogether of my country. Because of them I think India can, with the steady, patient work of selfless reformers, yet be made a nicer, or at least less brutal, place. My own regard for Chandi Prasadji is conveyed in one simple fact—that when he calls and I recognize his number on my cell phone, I stand up immediately. I live in Bangalore, and he speaks from Garhwal. My gesture, a reflex action really, speaks of my reverence for him; as probably the most noble Indian I have known, and, with the exception only of the late Shivarama Karanth, also the most remarkable.

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## **LOST IN THE WOODS**

In August 2010 — that is, exactly a year ago — Rahul Gandhi told a group of tribals in Orissa that he would be their soldier in New Delhi. There is no record of his having acted on that promise. The Dongria Konds of Niyamgiri forgotten, his attention has more recently been focused on the Jats of Noida, and other such groups that might help the Congress make a strong showing in the Uttar Pradesh elections.

Rahul Gandhi's behaviour is characteristic of the political class as a whole, which — regardless of party or generation — has treated tribals with condescension. The neglect goes back to Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi worked hard to abolish untouchability, and harder to bring about Hindu-Muslim harmony.

He inspired tens of thousands of women to enter public life. Somehow, however, the adivasis never figured seriously in the Mahatma's programmes of social reform. This failure was reproduced by his colleagues and successors in the Congress party.

Despite their neglect by the national movement, tribals were one of two groups recognised by the Constitution as needing special consideration. The other were the Dalits, whose problems were

given great visibility by their own leaders, such as BR Ambedkar, and by upper-caste reformers such as Gandhi.

As for the tribals, where the Congress had failed, it was activists like Jaipal Singh and Verrier Elwin who brought their problems to wider attention. Hence the reservation of seats in Parliament and of jobs in government for adivasis as well as Dalits.

As we mark our 65th Independence Day, how many Indians, I wonder, recognise the fact that tribals have gained least and lost most from India being a free and democratic country? Viewed historically, the tribals have faced seven successive (and overlapping) tragedies:

First, they live in India's densest forests, along its fastest-flowing rivers, and atop its richest veins of iron ore and bauxite. As the country has industrialised, the tribals have lost their homes and livelihoods to logging projects, dams, and mines which are directed by and benefit more powerful social forces;

Second, there has never been an adivasi Ambedkar, a leader of pan-Indian significance who could give hope and inspiration to tribals everywhere;

Third, the tribals are demographically concentrated in a few hill districts, and hence do not constitute a vote bank whose voice can, at least symbolically, be attended to by the political class. There is a striking contrast here with Dalits (as well as Muslims), who are more evenly distributed across India, have a far greater impact on the outcome of state and national elections, and are hence treated with far greater respect by national parties;

Fourth, a large share of officers' jobs under the 'Scheduled Tribes' quota, as well as reserved seats in the more prestigious colleges, go to the tribals of the North-east, who have a greater facility with the English language as well as access to better schools. This geographical distortion in the distribution of benefits calls perhaps for a revision of the category of 'Scheduled Tribes', to privilege the adivasis of central India;

Fifth, since they are without adequate representation in the higher civil service and without a political voice anyway, the tribals are subject to harsh treatment by the officials of the forest, police, revenue, education and health departments, who are obliged by law to serve the adivasis but oriented in practice to harass and exploit them. One consequence of this, as the demographer Arup Maharatna has shown, is that while Dalits have poor access to education and healthcare, adivasis are even worse off in these respects;

Sixth, the livelihood skills of the tribals, based on an intimate knowledge of the natural environment, cannot be easily transferred to the industrial economy (here again, the Dalits are somewhat better placed, since their artisanal and craft traditions can be incorporated into some modern sectors).

Seventh, since, except for Santhali, tribal languages are not officially recognised, they are not taught in government schools. With the medium of instruction being a language not their own, tribal children are at a disadvantage from the time they enter school.

In the past two decades, to these seven continuing tragedies has been added an eighth — the rising influence of Maoist extremists in tribal areas. While presuming to be the protectors of the adivasis, the Maoists offer no solution to their problems.

In fact, by escalating the level of violence, they intensify their suffering in the short and medium term. In any case, the revolutionaries have no long-term commitment to the adivasis, seeing them rather as a stepping-stone en route to the capture of State power.

There may even be a ninth tragedy — the relative invisibility of the tribal predicament in the so-called ‘national’ media. This media — both print and electronic — feature intense debates on (among other matters) the problems of the Dalits and the predicament of the Muslims, on female foeticide and khap panchayats, on scams relating to telecom licences and infrastructural projects.

These are all real problems, which must be discussed, and addressed.

But so must the situation of the adivasis who lose their lands to mines and dams, the adivasis deprived of access to schools and hospitals, the adivasis who are ignored by the media and the political parties, the adivasis who are massively under-represented in the professional classes and in the upper reaches of the bureaucracy, the adivasis subject to violence by State and insurgent alike.

The adivasis are the most vulnerable, the most victimised of Indians, a fact recognised by Rahul Gandhi on one day last year, this fleeting interest an advance on his political colleagues, who do not appear to have ever recognised this fact at all

### **A PATRIARCH FOR THE NATION?**

About twenty years ago, I found myself in the same room as Anna Hazare, at a meeting organized by the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi. Mr Hazare was becoming known in environmental circles for the work he had done in his native village, Ralegan Siddhi. His successful programmes of watershed conservation and afforestation stood in stark contrast to the efforts of the State Forest Department, who had handed over vast tracts of virgin forests to industry. Moreover, whereas the Forest Department was hostile to community participation, identifying villagers as ‘enemies of the forest’, Hazare had energized peasants to care for and renew their natural environment.

When Anna Hazare came into that Delhi meeting room of the early 1990s he wore the same dress as he does now. He exuded the same simplicity. But, as I recall, he spoke softly, even with

some diffidence. He was not entirely at home in a hall filled with urban folks whose cultural, albeit not moral, capital, was far greater than his.

It is said that power and wealth make men younger. So, apparently, does the attention of television. As we become older, the rest of us grow less alert, less energetic, less combative. This law of biology Hazare seems now to have defied. For the man I now see on my screen is not the man I once saw in a seminar room in New Delhi. He challenges and taunts the government and its Ministers, wagging his finger at the cameras. Once, Hazare was the voice and conscience of the village of Ralegaon Siddhi; now he demands that he be seen as the saviour of the nation itself.

Some television channels claim that Anna Hazare represents the overwhelming bulk of Indians. Print, cyberspace and soundings on the street suggest a more complicated picture. Liberals worry about the dangers to policy reform contained in street agitations led by men whose perfervid rhetoric undermines constitutional democracy. Dalits and backward castes see this as a reprise of the anti-Mandal agitation, led and directed by suvarna activists.

To these political reservations may be added the caution of the empirical sociologist. The population of the Delhi metropolitan area is in excess of ten million; yet at their height, the crowds in the Ramlila Maidan have never exceeded 50,000. In May 1998, 400,000 residents of Kolkata marched in protest against the Pokharan blasts. No one then said that 'India stands against Nuclear Bombs'. Now, however, as television cameras endlessly show the same scenes at the same place, we are told that 'India is for Anna'.

This said, it would be unwise to dismiss the resonance or social impact of the campaign led by Anna Hazare. It comes on the back of a series of scandals promoted by the present UPA Government—CWG, 2G, Adarsh, et. al. The media coverage of these scandals, over the past year and more, has led to a sense of disgust against this Government in particular, and (what is more worrying) against the idea of Government in general. It is this moment, this mood, this anger and this sense of betrayal, that Anna Hazare has ridden on. Hence the transformation of a previously obscure man from rural Maharashtra into a figure of—even if fleetingly—national importance.

The success of Anna Hazare is explained in large part by the character of those he opposes. He appears to be everything the Prime Minister and his Ministers are not—courageous, independent-minded, willing to stake his life for a principle. In an otherwise skeptical piece—which, among other things, calls Anna Hazare a 'moral tyrant' presiding over a 'comical anti-corruption opera'—the columnist C. P. Surendran writes that 'a party that can't argue its case against a retired army truck driver whose only strength really is a kind of stolid integrity and a talent for skipping meals doesn't deserve to be in power.' These two strengths—honesty and the willingness to eschew food, and by extension, the material life altogether—shine in comparison with the dishonest and grasping men on the other side.

Large swathes of the middle class have thus embraced Anna Hazare out of disgust with Dr Manmohan Singh's Government. That said, one must caution against an excessive identification with Anna Hazare. Hazare is a good man, perhaps even a saintly man. But his understanding remains that of a village patriarch.

The strengths and limitations of Anna Hazare are identified in *Green and Saffron*, a book by Mukul Sharma that shall appear later this year. Sharma is an admired environmental journalist, who did extensive fieldwork in Ralegan Siddhi. He was greatly impressed by much of what he saw. Careful management of water had improved crop yields, increased incomes, and reduced indebtedness. On the other hand, he found the approach of Anna Hazare 'deeply brahmanical'. Liquor, tobacco, even cable TV were forbidden. Dalit families were compelled to adopt a vegetarian diet. Those who violated these rules—or orders—were tied to a post and flogged.

Sharma found that on Hazare's instructions, no panchayat elections had been held in the village for the past two decades. During state and national elections, no campaigning was allowed in Ralegaon Siddhi. The reporter concluded that 'crucial to this genuine reform experiment is the absolute removal from within its precincts of many of the defining ideals of modern democracy'.

The sound-bites spontaneously offered by Anna Hazare in recent weeks do not inspire confidence. Emblematic here was his dismissal of the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, and of the Government's pointman in its handling of the anti-corruption movement, Kapil Sibal. Mr Hazare said that Dr Singh and Mr Sibal did not understand India because they had taken degrees at foreign universities.

As it happens, worthier men have had foreign degree; among them, the two greatest social reformers of modern India, M. K. Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar.

Hazare claims that the last sixty-four years of political freedom have been utterly wasted ('chausutt saal mein humko sahi azaadi nahin mili hai'). The fact is that had it not been for the groundwork laid by the Constitution, and by visionaries like Nehru, Patel, Ambedkar, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and others, Dalits and women would not have equal rights under the law, nor would elections based on universal franchise be regularly and freely held.

Dalits and women were less-than-equal citizens in the Raj of the British, and in the Raj of Anna Hazare's much admired Shivaji Maharaj as well. Those other regimes did not have, either, constitutional guarantees for the freedom of movement, combination and expression. To be sure, there remains a large slippage between precept and practice. I have elsewhere called India a 'fifty-fifty democracy'. The jurist Nani Palkhivala once said the same thing somewhat differently: India, he suggested, is a second-class democracy with a first-class Constitution.

In the years since Palkhivala first made this remark, India may have become a third-class democracy. But the ideal remains, to match which one needs patient, hard work on a variety of fronts. Anna Hazare claims that the creation of a single Lokpal will end 60% to 65% of

corruption. That remark confuses a village with a nation. A benign (and occasionally brutal) patriarch can bring about improvements in a small community. But a nation's problems cannot be solved by a Super-Cop or Super-Sarpanch, even (or perhaps especially) if he be assisted (as the legislation envisages) by thousands of busybody and themselves corruptible inspectors.

Improving the quality and functioning of democratic institutions will require far more than a Lokpal, whether Jan or Sarkari. We have to work for, among other things, changes in the law to make funding of elections more transparent, and to completely debar criminals from contesting elections; the reform of political parties to make them less dependent on family and kin; the use of technology to make the delivery of social services less arbitrary and more efficient; the insulation of the bureaucracy and the police from political interference; the lateral entry of professionals into public service; and more. In striving for these changes one must draw upon the experience, and expertise, of the very many Indians who share Hazare's idealism without being limited by his parochialism.

(published in The Telegraph, 27/8/2011)

### **THE THOUSAND BINAYAK SENS**

Last week, the Supreme Court granted bail to Binayak Sen, the doctor and civil rights activist who had been sentenced to life imprisonment by a court in Raipur on the charge of sedition. Dr. Sen was charged with being a Naxalite sympathizer, and of acting as a courier for the Communist Party of India (Maoist). The verdict of the lower court had been widely condemned. The proceedings were farcical; with no concrete evidence to press their charge, the Government of Chattisgarh argued by insinuation and innuendo, at one stage claiming that since the police had found no stethoscope in the house Dr Sen was not a doctor but a Maoist. Even if the evidence had been rock-solid, the sentence was outrageous. In China, professedly a totalitarian country, the writer Liu Xiabao had been sentenced to ten years in prison for speaking out against the state. A court in democratic India had awarded a life sentence for the same transgression.

In granting bail to Dr. Sen, the Supreme Court also commented adversely on the process by which he had been sentenced. The two judges hearing the appeal, Harjit Singh Bedi and Chandramauli Prasad, said that to have Maoist literature in one's possession did not make one a Maoist. As they pointedly added, mere ownership of a copy of 'My Experiments with Truth' did not make one a Gandhian.

Reading the judgement, I was reminded of a visit I had made several years ago to a jail in Chattisgarh. In May 2006, I was part of a team of independent citizens studying the fall-out of the civil war between Maoists and state-sponsored vigilantes known as Salwa Judum. Pulling out my notes of the trip, I find that it was on the 21st of May, 2006 that I visited the Jagdalpur jail.

Built in 1919, the prison had large, tiled, airy and well-lit rooms. The rooms were built around a courtyard; each room housed about fifty prisoners.

Indian jails are known to be small, crowded, dark and filthy. This was an exception. So, perhaps, was the Superintendent of the Prison, who was a tall, thoughtful, compassionate man named Akhilesh Tomar. Mr. Tomar organized a weekly dance and music show for and by the prisoners. There were other diversions; as we walked around the jail, we saw men playing carrom.

The Jagdalpur jail had, at this time, 1,337 prisoners in all. On a board in the Superintendent's office these were classified under different heads. 184 men and one woman were classed as being 'Naxal Vaadi Baandhi', i.e. as being incarcerated in connection with the Naxalite or Maoist rebellion. Mr. Tomar hastened to add that the classification was very approximate. Those prisoners who came from Dantewada—the district that was at the epicentre of the civil war—were usually classified as 'Naxalites'. The Superintendent remarked that this did not mean that they were all Naxalites.

After a tour of the prison, our group was allowed to talk, one-on-one, to some of the inmates. I had a conversation with a prisoner named Dabba Boomaiah. He was a soft-spoken Muria in his twenties, from a village named Bamanpur near Bhopalpatnam. He told me the story of how he now found himself in Jagdalpur jail. He had, he said, a job as a labourer on a lift irrigation project. One day, at work, he was passed by a road-building crew, who asked him the way to Bhopalpatnam police station. He escorted them there, but was then detained by the police. They began quizzing him about the presence of Naxalites in his village. Then they asked him to join the Salwa Judum. He said he couldn't become a vigilante, since he had a wife, two small kids and a widowed mother to support. Thereupon they arrested him.

It was now three months since Dabba Boomaiah took the road-building crew to Bhopalpatnam Police Station. After his arrest, he had been taken to Dantewara jail, from where he was shifted to Jagdalpur. He had not seen his wife and children since his arrest. When I asked why he hadn't been in touch with his family, he answered that they had never even visited Dantewada town. How then could they come to Jagdalpur, which was many hours away? However, he was in touch with a lawyer, who would represent him in a court hearing, which was scheduled for the following week. At that hearing Dabba Boomaiah hoped to get bail, and be permitted to rejoin the family.

I do now know whether Dabba Boomaiah got bail, whether the charges against him were dropped, whether he is still in Jagdalpur prison or has been reunited with his wife and children. A friend who knows the region well tells me that hearings are often cancelled at the last minute, as the Criminal Court in Jagdalpur is short of staff. Besides, cases against alleged Naxalites demand extra security, and when these are not available the cases are postponed.

There is always the possibility that Dabba Boomaiah was a consummately gifted actor. To me, he seemed merely to be another victim of the civil war in Dantewada. In the eyes of the Raipur

Sessions Court, Dr. Sen's 'crime' was that he had talked to Maoist prisoners and was alleged to keep Maoist literature in his home. The guilt they presumed was by association and insinuation, for Dr. Sen was not myself a member of the Maoist party, nor had he committed acts of violence or otherwise broken the law. Association and insinuation had also landed Dabba Boomaiah in jail. His 'crime' was that he happened to live in a district that had seen intense Maoist activity, and where a suspicious and paranoid State Government demanded that everyone take sides.

From what one hears and knows, there are thousands of Dabba Boomaiahs languishing in the jails of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and Orissa, thousands of adivasis innocent of all crimes except that of having made their home in districts where insurgents and the police are ranged against one another. Pace the Supreme Court judgement, these adivasis have not read Mao, indeed have not even heard of Mao. But they live in areas where Maoists are active and influential; which makes them, in the eyes of what passes for the law in these tragic, troubled parts of India, Maoists themselves.

When the judge in Raipur sentenced Binayak Sen to life imprisonment, the Home Minister said that he could always appeal to a higher court. Most victims of the civil war in Chattisgarh, however, do not have such recourse. They are at the mercy of an arbitrary and often brutal police, and of lower courts shot through with corruption and subject to intimidation. For someone like Dabba Boommaiah, New Delhi is even more distant than Jagdalpur is to his family. The Supreme Court deserves three cheers for the relief it has granted Dr. Binayak Sen, but, pending the suffering of the ordinary adivasi in Maoist-infested areas, let us not raise three cheers for Indian democracy itself.

(published in The Telegraph, 23/4/2011)

## **THE REAL OFFENDERS**

Narendra Modi may never have banned Joseph Lelyveld's *The Great Soul* had the book's editor, the Wall Street Journal, been as discerning as his counterpart in the New York Times. The Manhattan dailies carried reviews on the same weekend, but these could not have been more different in style or substance. The Times reviewer, who has himself written fine books on India, judiciously assessed the strengths and weaknesses of Lelyveld's approach, situated Gandhi historically, and—in the wake of the controversy that followed, this may be the crucial point—did not mention Hermann Kallenbach at all.

The Journal, on the other hand, gave the book to a British reviewer whose powers of judgement are such that he once spoke of Tony Blair as a latter-day Winston Churchill. An apologist for imperialism past and present, who has defended water-boarding by the CIA and expressed solidarity with Boer racists, he used the platform to mount a character assassination of a great opponent of the British Empire. Quoting words and phrases out of context, he characterized



Gandhi as a ‘sexual weirdo, a political incompetent and a fanatical faddist...’. Two paragraphs of his review were about Gandhi’s friendship with Kallenbach, described by the reviewer as ‘the love of his life... for whom Gandhi left his wife in 1908.’

This review appeared on the 26th March; two days later, the British tabloid Daily Mail ran a story with the headline: ‘Gandhi “left his wife to live with a male lover” new book claims.’ Clearly inspired by the Journal story, it called Gandhi ‘bisexual’ and said ‘after four children together [with Kasturba] they split up so he could be with Kallenbach....’

The foolish decision to ban *The Great Soul* in parts of India was provoked not by the book itself, but by tendentious misrepresentations by Britons still not reconciled to the loss of their Empire. However, I write this from the United States, with a copy of *The Great Soul* at my side. The two questions one must ask, in order of importance, are; how much of the book is devoted to Gandhi’s friendship with Kallenbach? And what does the book say about the subject?

By my count, Kallenbach appears on 33 of *The Great Soul*’s 349 pages. I think Lelyveld exaggerates the significance of Kallenbach in Gandhi’s life in South Africa. In his book, Henry Polak appears only fleetingly, whereas Pranjivan Mehta is not mentioned at all—although these two men were easily as important to Gandhi at this time. This is compounded by the sin of anachronism, the tendency to assess male friendships of a hundred years ago through the lens of a progressive New Yorker of today. Lelyveld privileges things said now to the written evidence of the past. Someone in Ahmedabad tells him Kallenbach and Gandhi were a ‘couple’; someone in Australia claims the relationship was ‘homoerotic’. These remarks (likewise informed by a contemporary sensibility) should have been disregarded; what he should have perhaps laid far more stress on is a remark made by Kallenbach himself, where, writing to his brother in June 1908, he notes that ever since he met Gandhi, ‘I have given up my sex life’.

Lelyveld is stretching the evidence in claiming that Gandhi’s friendship (he uses the term ‘relationship’) with Kallenbach was ‘the most intimate’ of his life. The further claim that ‘Gandhi, leaving his wife behind, had gone to live with a man’ is even more tenuous. The fact was that Gandhi had to be in Transvaal to organize the Indians in that province. Kasturba and the boys stayed at the ashram in Natal, being visited by Gandhi as often as his work permitted.

The friendship between these two men was not sexual, not even ‘homoerotic’; it was, as Gandhi himself described it, that between brothers. While they lived in the same house, Gandhi’s commitment to brahmacharya was matched by Kallenbach’s own. Much later (although Lelyveld does not mention or perhaps know this) Kallenbach broke their common vow of celibacy by having a sexual relationship—with a woman.

Lelyveld’s arguments may be anachronistic, but his prose is dignified and restrained. Moreover, Kallenbach goes unmentioned on 90% of the book’s pages, where matters of social and political import are given their due. Indians, aware only of the misrepresentations in the tabloid press, need to ponder these words from the book’s last paragraph: ‘In India today, the term “Gandhism”

is ultimately synonymous with social conscience; his example—of courage, persistence, identification with the poorest, striving for selflessness—still has a power to inspire...’

One might thus reasonably view Joseph Lelyveld as the hapless victim of, on the one hand, reactionary British journalists, and on the other, opportunistic Indian politicians, who seek to camouflage their own betrayal of the Mahatma’s ideals by proclamations of reverence to his memory.

Two of Gandhi’s grandsons—themselves writers of distinction—have urged the Government to allow the book to be published and circulated in this country. What is at stake here is both the maturity of Indian nationalism and the credibility of Indian democracy. Are our heroes so weak that we need bullies masquerading as patriots to protect them? Is our democracy so fragile that we cannot allow free debate on individuals and processes? The Lelyveld case has put our national politicians (Manmohan Singh, Sonia Gandhi, L. K. Advani, Sushma Swaraj, Prakash Karat—all of them) on test. The censorship of ideas, while congenial to Islamic theocracies, military dictatorships, and one-party communist regimes, sits strangely and uncomfortably with our democratic claims. The answer to a book is another book—not a ban.

(published in the Hindustan Times, 6th April 2011)

### **FAITH CYNICAL AND SUBLIME**

In the spring of 1907, the London publisher John Murray published a book on Persian mystics by one F. Hadland Davis. The book appeared in a series called ‘The Wisdom of the East’, whose editors desired their publications to be ‘ambassadors of good-will and understanding between East and West, the old world of Thought, and the new of Action.’ Through the books in the series, it was hoped that the Western (and Christian) reader would acquire ‘a deeper knowledge of the great ideals and lofty philosophy of Oriental thought [which] may help to a revival of that true spirit of Charity which neither despises nor fears the nations of another creed and colour.’

One of the first readers of the book was an Easterner educated in the West, Mohandas K. Gandhi. Then based in Johannesburg, Gandhi may have acquired the book from a local store, or perhaps ordered it from London. At any rate, he was deeply impressed, writing about it in the journal he then edited, Indian Opinion. Of the mystics whom Hadland Davis had profiled, Gandhi was charmed most by Jalaluddin Rumi, who aspired to ‘a pure heart and love of God.’ Gandhi quotes Rumi saying, when asked where one could find God, that ‘I saw the Cross and also Christians, but I did not find God on the Cross. I went to find him in the temple, but in vain. I saw him neither in Herat nor in Kandahar.

He could be found neither on the hill nor in the cave. At last, I looked into my heart and found Him there, only there and nowhere else.’ Gandhi ended his review by saying that he would ‘like to recommend the book to everyone. It will be of profit to all, Hindus and Muslims alike.’

Gandhi’s meditation on Rumi was published in June 1907. That November, the Gujarati New Year, Nutan Varsh, fell on the same day as the great Muslim festival, Id. Gandhi used this coincidence to offer a brief homily on the significance of inter-faith understanding. ‘If the people of different religions grasp the real significance of their own religion’, he wrote, ‘they will never hate the people of any religion other than their own. As Jalaluddin Rumi has said or as Shri Krishna said to Arjun, there are many rivers, and they appear different from one another, but they all meet in the ocean.’

A hundred years ago Jalaluddin Rumi was known only to the specialist, but due to the efforts of more recent translators and publicists this 13th century mystic is—according to an article in a recent issue of the Times Literary Supplement—the most widely read poet in the Western world today. As it happens, after those two occasions in 1907 Gandhi did not write about the Sufi mystic again. However, the lesson he took from Rumi he upheld and affirmed all his life.

Twenty-five years after his review of Hadland Davis’s *Persian Mystics*, Gandhi received an anguished letter from an English disciple named Verrier Elwin. A licensed priest of the Church of England, Elwin was threatened by his Bishop with excommunication, because he refused to take the Gospel to the Gond tribals he then lived with. The priest had learnt from Gandhi that there were many paths to God; while he himself had chosen the one laid down by Christ, he would permit the tribals to follow the road of their ancestors. The Bishop vehemently disagreed, saying that Jesus commanded his followers to make Christians of unbelievers.

Faced with expulsion from his Church, Elwin wrote to Gandhi for advice. The Mahatma asked him not to take to heart what the Bishop had told him, since the message of Jesus was ‘in the main denied in the churches, whether Roman or English.’ Even if he was thrown out of the Church of England, he could remain a Christian according to his own lights. For, as Gandhi consolingly told the confused young man: ‘Your pulpit is the whole earth. The blue sky is the roof of your own church.’

This last piece of advice is highly pertinent to the once very intense, then moribund, and now revived dispute in the northern Indian town of Ayodhya. For Jalaluddin Rumi and Mohandas K. Gandhi did not need structures of marble and stone to find God in. Nor should we. One can be good, godly, and devout without ever entering a temple, or mosque or church either.

Twenty-four years have passed since the locks were opened in the makeshift shrine to Ram; twenty-one since L. K. Advani led a blood-soaked ‘rath yatra’; eighteen since the Babri Masjid was brought down by a mob. In this time, a generation of Indians has come of age with no memories of the dispute which once polarized the country. Do we need to open the wounds again? When asked this question by a visiting journalist earlier this month, a student in Ayodhya

answered by saying that he hoped that instead of a temple or a mosque, a hospital would come up in the disputed site instead.

Before and after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, various suggestions were offered as to how to put an end to the controversy. A well-meaning Gandhian suggested a multi-faith centre. Another gave this idea more specificity; we should, he said, build a 'Ram-Rahim Darwaza', a large archway signifying open-ness and dialogue. The proposal of the young student is as noble as any other, and perhaps more practical. What could be more meaningful than a structure tending to the poor, the sick, and the wounded, in a place whose mythic and historic resonances once provoked riot and mass murder in the name of faith?

This week the Lucknow Bench of the Allahabad High Court was to decide who owned the title-suit to the site in Ayodhya. The Court's sitting has now been postponed; however, whatever its decision, the matter will surely be taken by one or other party to the Supreme Court. The arguments will drag on. The Sangh Parivar will insist that a grand Ram temple come up on the site. Muslim extremists will argue that the Babri Masjid must be rebuilt.

In my view, rather than leave the matter to the courts, the Central Government should intervene decisively to end the dispute. Under the Land Acquisition Act, the State can acquire property from individuals and communities in the name of the 'public purpose'. This act has been grossly abused in the recent past, to allow private companies to grab land owned by peasants and tribals. (The conflicts at Singur, Nandigram, Kshipur and Niyamgiri were all sparked by the misuse of this Act.) Here now is a chance for the State to redeem itself and simultaneously to put an end to this religious—or shall we say pseudo-religious—controversy. Nothing would serve the 'public purpose' better than if the Government of India was to acquire the land being fought over in Ayodhya, clear it of intruders, and build a new, well-equipped, and adequately staffed hospital for the residents of the town.

Mahatma Gandhi was the greatest Ram bhakt since Tulsidas; yet once he had reached adulthood, he never entered a Ram temple (or any other). Jalaluddin Rumi turned away—or was turned back—from the mosques in Herat and Kandahar. Both men knew that the path to God was independent of physical structures and self-appointed preachers. Had they been alive, I think Gandhi and Rumi would both have approved of a hospital being built at the disputed site in Ayodhya.

(published in The Telegraph, 25/9/2010)

## THE LIVING LEGACY OF SANJAY GANDHI

The only time I have been less than sorrowful at a premature death was when Sanjay Gandhi perished in an air crash. He was truly a nasty piece of work. Having dropped out of the Doon School, and then dropped out of an apprentice scheme in the Rolls Royce factory in the United Kingdom, he used his mother's connections to start a car factory. A sycophantic journalist, Khushwant Singh, claimed that Sanjay's factory would produce 50,000 cars a year, which would soon 'be seen on the roads of Haryana and Delhi, and a month or two later they will be running between Kalimpong and Kanyakumari.'

Sanjay himself knew better. He realized before his chamchas that no cars made by him would ever be fit to run on Indian streets. So he turned his interest to politics instead. In June 1975 his mother, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, imposed a state of Emergency. All opposition politicians were arrested, and the press censored. Sanjay himself quickly emerged as the second most powerful person in India. Chief Ministers and Cabinet Ministers took orders from him. Khushwant Singh thought this entirely legitimate. In choosing Sanjay Gandhi as the 'Man of the Year' in the magazine he edited, Singh told his readers that 'Sanjay has taken a heavy load on his young shoulders. He has a long and arduous road ahead of him. Do not strew banana skins on his path. Help him to reach his goal of a prosperous and happy India.'

In the context of the Emergency, it was impossible for an ordinary citizen of India to come close enough to Sanjay to lovingly offer him a whole banana, let alone bar with path with a banana skin. On the other hand, Sanjay had the power to do far nastier things to the ordinary citizen, to break his house, for example, or sterilize him against his will, or put him in jail—all of which he did, with relish, using the entire might of the state apparatus that his indulgent mother had now put under his command.

The crimes of Sanjay Gandhi against the Constitution of India were many and varied. They have been documented by historians, and by those who lived through those times. Contrast Khushwant Singh's effusions with an article written by a more clear-eyed journalist, which was published in the Delhi weekly *Mainstream* on the 26th of March 1977. The article was actually written towards the end of the Emergency, but could only be published when censorship had been lifted. Still, knowing the vengeful nature of his target, the journalist was prudent enough to use the pseudonym, 'Analyst'.

The nom-de-plume was anodyne, but the contents of the article were anything but. On the basis of his own, first-hand, experience, 'Analyst' wrote of how the regime of press censorship was imposed on the direct instructions of Sanjay Gandhi. When the Emergency began 'none of the people at the top, even the Minister [of Information and Broadcasting] I. K. Gujral, seemed to know anything and we were all waiting instructions from some other place.' Soon, it became clear that the Censor was getting orders from the Prime Minister's second son. At the latter's initiative, two independent news agencies, the Press Trust of India and the United News of India,

were merged to form a sarkari-controlled company called Samachar. This new agency was then used to print stories ‘aimed at building up the personality of Mr Sanjay Gandhi.’

Living in Delhi, and close to the corridors of power, this senior journalist was able to see how Sanjay Gandhi was instrumental in effecting key changes of personnel in the Government and the public sector. Thus, during the Emergency, ‘the entire nationalised banking system was mercilessly abused to benefit Sanjay Gandhi’s corrupt friends....’ The Chairmam of the Central Bank, a Mr Taneja, ‘was worried at the persistent demands of Sanjay Gandhi for more loans.’ When he resisted he was sacked, and replaced with a more pliant man. ‘

The Reserve Bank itself was put in charge of a half-drunk, amiable insurance man, K. R. Puri, with no knowledge whatsoever of the banking sytem but endowed with the virtue of subservience to Sanjay Gandhi.’

A hurdle to this manipulation of the financial system was the capable and experienced Finance Minister, C. Subramaniam, who represented the best values of the old-style Congress of Gandhi and Nehru. To circumvent Mr Subramaniam, key departments in his Ministry—such as Banking, Income Tax, and Customs—were, wrote ‘Analyst’, ‘taken out of the control of the Finance Minister and put in charge of a novice, a political adventurer with roots nowhere, having no standing except as a lackey of Sanjay Gandhi. This is Pranab Kumar Mukherji [sic], who is today known in his home state of West Bengal, [and] in the business and financial circles all over India, as a servile waiter of Sanjay Gandhi.’

In another section of his essay, ‘Analyst’ detailed the siphoning of money to London from steel contracts awarded to contacts of the Prime Minister’s younger son. The journalist further claimed that Sanjay’s ‘Doon School pal, Kamal Nath, has made piles through the dealings of his EMC enterprise with the West Bengal State Electricity Board, getting contracts worth huge amounts for which no tender was called, nor the prescribed rules and procedures followed.’

Sanjay Gandhi also interfered grievously with the civil services. Previously, ‘the appointment, transfer, promotion of Joint Secretaries, Deputy Secretaries and other executive officers of the Government of India was made by a Senior Establishment Board of the Cabinet Secretariat.’ Now, however, these duties were ‘usurped by Sanjay Gandhi’s man, R. K. Dhawan,’ a stenographer in the Prime Minister’s office. ‘Analyst’ wrote that under Dhawan’s supervision, ‘practically all the appointments of civil servants was made contingent on the confession of personal loyalty to Sanjay Gandhi.’

During the Emergency, Sanjay Gandhi was allowed to do more or less what he wanted in the Union Territory of Delhi. This was his particular bailiwick, where his experiments in slum clearance and sterilization were first carried out. A problem for Sanjay was that the Lieutenant-Governor of Delhi was an upright man named Baleshwar Prasad. So he was removed, and ‘in his place, a spineless civil servant of no distinction was inducted; the new Lt Governor, Kishan

Chander, has been supplied by Sanjay with an Adviser, Navin Chawla, a pathological case of an administration officer with total subservience to Sanjay Gandhi personally.’

To the best of my knowledge, the charges made by ‘Analyst’ were not contested or disputed when his article was published. Four of those he mentioned are still active in public life. Two are senior Ministers in the Government of India; a third just demitted office as Chief Election Commissioner; the fourth was till recently an M. P., and remains an active and influential Congressman.

In fact, some other members of the Union Cabinet also first entered politics as acolytes of Sanjay Gandhi. Nor does the influence run only on one side of the fence. Two senior leaders of the principal Opposition party, the BJP, owe everything to Sanjay Gandhi. One is his wife, Maneka; the other his assistant in the brutalizing of Old Delhi, Jagmohan.

Indian democrats live in hope. The particular hope here is that these protégés of Sanjay Gandhi have rejected, in spirit and in deed, the profoundly anti-democratic methods of their one-time mentor.

The Telegraph 11/09/2010

### **THE ECUMENICAL MARXIST**

The great German sociologist Max Weber once made an important distinction between universities on the one side and religious seminaries and political parties on the other. Seminaries and parties upheld a particular ideology, and made it mandatory for their members to believe in it. However, universities were emphatically not centres of indoctrination. Its professors could not, or at least should not, propagate their own political or religious beliefs. Rather, they should teach the student ‘facts, their conditions, laws and interrelations’, serving in this manner to ‘sharpen the student’s capacity to understand the actual conditions of his own exertions...’. Weber added that ‘what ideals the [student] should serve—“what gods he must bow before”—these they [the teachers] require him to deal with on his own responsibility, and ultimately in accordance with his own conscience’.

The Indian teacher of my acquaintance who most nobly upheld this intellectual credo was Anjan Ghosh, who died earlier this month in Kolkata. Anjan took a first degree in English Literature, before doing an M. A. and M. Phil in Sociology at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). He then commenced a Ph D, taking as his topic of research the life and labours of mineworkers in Dhanbad. He taught briefly at the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, before moving to a position at the Indian Institute of Management in Kolkata.

In 1980 I joined IIM Kolkata to do a doctorate in Sociology. Anjan Ghosh was one of my teachers. He was, like many thoughtful Indians those days, a Marxist. As a college student, he

had attended the famous founding rally of the CPI (M-L) on the Kolkata Maidan. He believed the Naxalities were more engaged with the peasantry, as well as more sympathetic to questions of culture, than the ruling CPI (M). However, he was a fellow traveller rather than a fully paid-up member of the new party. He cherished his intellectual independence too much for that.

Anjan was formidably well-read in the Marxist scriptures. That, and a goatee he wore, led to his being named 'Lenin' by his JNU friends. However, as my own experience showed, Anjan kept his political beliefs completely out of the classroom. He knew that there were great social theorists other than Karl Marx. With him I read both Max Weber's 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' and Emile Durkheim's 'The Division of Labour in Society'. While never a narrow patriot, Anjan believed that the contributions of Indian scholars had been ignored by a West-obsessed academy. He admired M. N. Srinivas and André Beteille in particular, both for the elegance of their prose and for the subtlety of their arguments. Through him, I came to admire them for those very reasons.

Among the gifts Anjan bestowed on me was an introduction to the charmed circle of intellectuals that hung around the journal *Frontier*, then edited by the lapsed poet and lapsed Marxist Samar Sen. From the IIM campus in Joka I made a weekly journey to the *Frontier* office in central Kolkata, where Samar babu and his devoted assistant, Timir Basu, discussed the contents of the forthcoming issue and allocated tasks to each of us. Intellectuals are a selfish, solitary species; this, on the other hand, was an exercise in collective, collaborative, work, that enriched all those who participated in it.

Many left-wing intellectuals take great pride in their social commitments, but their words generally speak louder than their actions. Not Anjan Ghosh. Aside from his involvement with *Frontier*, Anjan was also active in the film society movement, and in the human rights movement. He had a close association with the Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, based in Delhi; and with the Association for the Protection of Democratic Rights, based in Kolkata. His work outside academics was undertaken with a characteristic lack of fuss, and with no self-advertisement whatsoever.

As a Marxist, Anjan Ghosh was also unorthodox in his appreciation of caste as an organizing factor in Indian society. In 1979 he wrote a precocious essay in the Delhi journal *Seminar* with the innocuous title 'The Seventh Indian'. This dealt with the social predicament of the Dalits, who, despite being 1/7th of India's population, had been largely ignored by sociologists and Marxists, and largely condescended to by political parties. A little later he wrote a longer essay in a Bangla journal on how, and why, caste was not simply an 'epiphenomena' of class. These ideas are now widely accepted by Marxists, but, in articulating them in the late 1970s, my teacher was roughly twenty years ahead of the curve.

In 1984 Anjan Ghosh joined the faculty of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSC) in Kolkata. By now, his disenchantment with left-wing orthodoxy had led him to abandon his



research on the working class, who are considered by the Marxist catechism to be the advanced guard of the revolution. Some years later, he took leave from the CSSC and went to the University of Michigan to do a Ph D, in their famous History and Anthropology programme. He wrote an elegant thesis (sadly, never published in book form) on the social role of rumour in intensifying communal violence in 20th century Bengal.

A bibliography from 2007 available on the Web lists some forty scholarly essays published by Anjan Ghosh—on topics ranging from caste and religious violence to ethno-nationalism and the environmental impact of coal mining. But Anjan also had a profound influence on the writings of other scholars. He was a born teacher, who for family reasons (an aged mother to whom he was an only son) had to be based in Kolkata, a place deeply inhospitable to sociological enquiry. One reason for this is the long stranglehold on the city's universities of a somewhat mechanical variety of Marxism. Since Karl Marx spoke of 'political economy' and 'historical materialism', his followers have allowed a honourable space in the academy for the scholarly disciplines of economics, politics, and history. They have not been so well disposed to sociology, which their twin Fatherlands, the Soviet Union and Communist China, both dismissed as a 'bourgeois' science.

Had Anjan Ghosh been permitted to teach in Delhi or Bombay he would perhaps have more fully come into his own. Even so, he influenced very many young sociologists and anthropologists, whom he met at conferences or at the annual 'Cultural Studies' workshop he helped organize. I myself owe more to Anjan Ghosh than to any other scholar. He taught me in the lecture theatre, but also in the tea shop. Every morning, I would meet him as he got off the staff bus that conveyed the IIM's faculty to the Joka campus. Every evening, I would walk with him to the bus stop to catch some last remarks before he went home. Through those addas he encouraged me to be less parochial, by reading scholars not prescribed in my syllabus and by venturing into disciplines that I was not formally trained in. And he never, ever, imposed his ideas or beliefs on me. The conclusions I eventually arrived at were my own responsibility, a product of my own conscience.

Marxism and Marxists can be crude and strident. Anjan Ghosh, on the other hand, was a gentle, cultured, and utterly civilized human being. He humanized everything he touched; and made every student he taught more curious as well as less egotistic. By the end, Anjan may have stopped calling himself a 'Marxist'. But even in the days he wore the label proudly he was, in the classroom, remarkably undogmatic. In not seeking to impose his beliefs on his students he was so very unlike most social science professors in Kolkata, and beyond.

(published in The Telegraph, 19/6/2010)

## MERCHANDIZING GANDHI

In twenty years of studying Gandhi, I have had, as friends and advisers, three brothers who grew up in a flat in Connaught Place owned by the Hindustan Times (of which paper their father was then the editor). They all went to the same school (Modern) and college (St. Stephen's), and all had a deep scholarly interest in the life and legacy of Gandhi. Fortunately for me, and the world at large, they approached him from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives. One analysed him as a philosopher, another as a historian and biographer, a third as a student of literature and language.

These brothers were named Ramchandra, Rajmohan and Gopalkrishna. Their surname, as it happens, was Gandhi. However, unlike scions of other freedom-fighters, they never exploited or abused the name of their grandfather. Where the direct descendants of other famous Indians have acted as if they were owed something—or a great deal—by India, these three brothers always asked themselves what they could do for India. Their lives have been marked by an exemplary devotion to their country, and to the principles of its founding figures. In promoting (and practicing) inter-faith harmony as well as inter-generational justice, they have learnt as much from Nehru, Ambedkar, Tagore, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Lohia, JP, Acharya Kripalani, M. S. Subbulakshmi, and Rajagopalachari, as from Gandhi himself.

For these three brothers, 'grandson of Gandhi' has been, at best, a tertiary identity, and one never advertised by themselves. As for their primary identities, Ramchandra was a much loved teacher (in, among other places, the universities of Delhi, Rajasthan, Hyderabad, and Viswabharati), Rajmohan a brave and respected editor (of the weekly *Himmat* and the daily *Indian Express*), and Gopalkrishna an outstanding public servant (he founded the Nehru Centre in London, and also served with distinction as our High Commissioner in South Africa). Their secondary identities are as scholars and students of Gandhi's ideas and practice. As a philosopher, Ramchandra Gandhi explored how Gandhi was a product of—as well as a departure from—the long line of modern Hindu spiritualists that begins with Ramakrishna and includes such figures as Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharishi. As a historian, Rajmohan Gandhi has underscored how this foremost critic of the British Empire was in many ways shaped by it. Meanwhile, as a biographer, he has also paid special attention to Gandhi's relationships with his followers—Nehru, Patel, et al.—and with his critics—notably, Jinnah and Ambedkar. Meanwhile, as a multi-lingual Indian himself, Gopalkrishna Gandhi has studied this Gujarati's relationship with other provinces (such as West Bengal), while also producing a superb anthology of his writings.

It is well to recall the career of these accidental Gandhians now, when a professional Gandhian has been much in the news for his ringing endorsement of the expensive 'Gandhi' pens issued by the Mont Blanc company. For Tushar Gandhi's only identification is 'great grandson of the Mahatma'. Unlike some of his kinsmen, he has made steady and cumulative use of the genes he shares with Gandhi. In the past, it was merely publicity—now, it appears, it is something more, with Mont Blanc gifting his Foundation some Rs 72 lakhs, which, despite the inevitable

disclaimers, is clearly a quid pro quo for his support of their scheme. Let us move the discussion beyond Gandhi relatives whether honourable or opportunistic. There is a man in Ahmedabad who is about the same age as Tushar. He shares a mother tongue, Gujarati, as well as a lifelong engagement with Gandhi. This man is the author of a landmark study of the literary landscape of 19th century Gujarat, and of a fine-grained analysis of the differences between the two editions of Gandhi's autobiography. He is also an accomplished translator, who has rendered into English the moving biography by Chandubhai Dalal of Gandhi's rebellious son, Harilal. This past week, his English translation of a four-volume biography of the Mahatma by Narayan Desai was released in Ahmedabad.

I have not mentioned the scholar's name, in keeping with his own understated personality, and since an interested reader can go to a decent bookshop and find out anyway. But let me say something about Narayan Desai, who is arguably our greatest living Gandhian. Narayan is the only child of Gandhi's secretary and effective second-in-command Mahadev Desai. Growing up in the ashram, he went to jail in the 1942 movement; after Independence, he spent decades doing working on land distribution and social peace. Now in his eighties, he spends his time touring Gujarat performing a 'Gandhi Katha', a monologue in prose and poetry that conveys the religious and cultural pluralism of Gandhi to an audience used to hearing other—and opposed—messages from their Chief Minister.

Wile Mont Blanc may be laughing all the way to the bank, Gandhi's name and reputation can stand any amount of distortion or perversion. However, the current controversy has served a purpose—at least a certain 'great grandson' has finally been outed as a racketeer. Perhaps reporters and TV anchors will now be wiser than to presume that he, in any way, represents Gandhi. As for understanding Gandhi, help is at hand, in the form of the just released biography by Narayan Desai. Knowing the author, and his translator, I can assert than one page of the book will tell you more about the Mahatma than five hundred sound-bites by a certain opportunist who happens merely to be descended from him.

## **THE ABSENT CELEBRANT**

It is well known that when India became free on the 15th of August 1947, Mahatma Gandhi declined to join the festivities in New Delhi. While his follower Jawaharlal Nehru spoke in the Council Hall about India's tryst with destiny, and the crowds danced on the streets outside, Gandhi was in Calcutta, seeking to restore peace between Hindus and Muslims. His refusal to join his colleagues in New Delhi has been interpreted by some commentators as a sign that he was in mourning. This interpretation is not entirely tenable. While Gandhi was distressed by the religious rioting that accompanied Independence and Partition, he did not gainsay the value and

achievement of political freedom. But he remained concerned with what his fellow Indians would make of their hard-won, and somewhat belated, swaraj.

The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi has seven entries dated 15th August, 1947. The first is a letter written to his Quaker friend Agatha Harrison in London. Gandhi says here that 'my way of celebrating great events, such as today's, is to thank God for it and, therefore, to pray'. Agatha Harrison had apparently asked whether he followed the debates in the British Parliament on the Indian Independence Bill. Gandhi said he did not get time to read newspapers; in any case, he commented, 'what does it matter, who talks in my favour or against me, if I myself am sound at bottom?'

The second entry for the day is also a letter, written to an Indian man whose father had died in a bid to stem the rioting. Gandhi tells the son that 'the best advice I can give you is that you should do all do whatever you can for the building up of the freedom that has come to us today and the first thing you can do is to copy your father's bravery'.

Item four describes a visit to Gandhi's temporary home in Beliaghata of the new Governor of West Bengal, C. Rajagopalachari. When the Governor congratulated him on the 'miracle he had wrought' (namely, the cessation of violence in the city), Gandhi answered 'that he could not be satisfied until Hindus and Muslims felt safe in one another's company and returned to their own homes to live as before. Without that change of heart, there was likelihood of future deterioration in spite of the present enthusiasm'.

The fifth entry for the day relates to a visit by some Communist activists. Gandhi told them that 'political workers, whether Communist or Socialist, must forget today all differences and help to consolidate the freedom which had been attained. Should we allow it to break into pieces?'

Soon after the Communists, a group of students came to the Haidari Mansion in Beliaghata to seek Gandhi's advice. The Mahatma told them that 'students ought to think and think well. They should do no wrong. It was wrong to molest an Indian citizen merely because he professed a different religion. Students should do everything to build up a new State of India which would be everybody's pride'.

The last item in the Collected Works for this day pertains to a speech made at a public meeting at the Rash Bagan Maidan in Beliaghata. As reported in his own journal, Harijan, Gandhi began by congratulating Hindus and Muslims for 'meeting together in perfect friendliness'. He hoped that this 'was not a momentary impulse'. From the theme of communal amity he went on to speak of the responsibilities of ordinary citizens. Earlier in the day, when the new Indian Governor had taken over from his British predecessor, a crowd had invaded Government House, tramped over the lawn and flower beds, marched into the building and generally made a nuisance of themselves. Hearing of this, Gandhi said 'he would be glad if it meant only a token of people's power. But he would be sick and sorry if the people thought that they could do what they liked with the Government and other property. That would be criminal lawlessness. He hoped,

therefore, that they had of their own accord vacated the Governor's palace as readily as they had occupied it. He would warn the people that now that they were free, they would use the freedom with wise restraint....'

In this narration, I have skipped one item, number three, in part because I think it the most important, and hence best dealt with last. This pertained to a visit to the Mahatma by the Ministers of the new Government of West Bengal. What Gandhi said to them is summarized in the Collected Works—but there is a slightly longer and somewhat more vivid account in Manu Gandhi's book *The Miracle of Gandhi*. This informs us that when the Bengal Ministers sought his blessings, Gandhi told them:

'Today, you have worn on your heads a crown of thorns. The seat of power is a nasty thing. You have to remain ever wakeful on that seat. You have to be more truthful, more non-violent, more humble and more forbearing. You had been put to test during the British regime. But in a way it was no test at all. But now there will be no end to your being tested. Do not fall a prey to the lure of wealth. May God help you! You are there to serve the villages and the poor'.

The most popular accounts of how Gandhi spent 15th August, 1947—as for example those contained in Richard Attenborough's film and the book *Freedom at Midnight*—make great play of his absence from New Delhi. They present him as a man in pain and anguish, who refused to join his compatriots in celebrating the arrival of Independence. But in terms of what he actually said and did on that day we can see these accounts as exaggerations. He was unhappy with the bloodshed, certainly, but not so despairing as to lost hope altogether. Rather, Gandhi used the occasion to counsel his countrymen on how to make the best and most humane use of the freedom that had come their way.

His words made sense, then, and they make sense now. At a time when many—most?—Ministers in State and Central Governments are consumed by arrogance and self-love, they need to be reminded that as elected representatives of the people they should be motivated rather by truth, humility, and service. In a deeply divided polity, the political parties must recognize that in times of crisis they should set aside their differences and work together for social peace. When populist notions of democracy stress exclusively on rights, and encourage a cavalier attitude to state property, it is well to be told that citizens also have responsibilities. Finally, in 2009 as in 1947, a special role devolves on students, who, with their lives in front of them, can do more than the middle-aged or elderly in building an India worthy of the nation's founders and of their ideals.

Gandhi's words and warnings have a strikingly contemporary ring. Since they were uttered in Kolkata, those who live in that city, and in the state of which it is part, may read into them a special meaning. In the recent past, West Bengal has been peculiarly prone to political partisanship, state apathy, and populist violence. However, these tendencies are manifest, in lesser or greater degree, in other states as well. Wherever we are or were this 15th of August, we

would do well to remember, and take heed of, what a very wise Indian said and did on this day sixty-two years ago.

## **FAITH AND FREEDOM**

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### **NEHRU IN A NOVEL**

Arguably the best single-volume study of India's first Prime Minister is Nehru: A Contemporary's Estimate, by the Australian diplomat Walter Crocker. This is a book that I have long known (and admired). However, when I met the author's son recently, he presented me a copy of a lesser known work by his mother, a novel through the pages of which Nehru flits in and out.

Claire Crocker's Peacock Dancing is set in the India of the early 1960s. The main characters include the Australian High Commissioner, here named Sir Ronald Selborne, his wife, Caroline, and their daughter, Elizabeth. The last-named falls in love with a Rajput army officer, while her closest friend, the daughter of the Swedish Ambassador, wishes to marry an official in the Pakistani mission in New Delhi.

These romances and their respective fates are at the heart of the novel. But since much of the action takes place at diplomatic parties and government receptions, the most important man in New Delhi cannot fail to make an appearance. After meeting him at a party, Elizabeth Selborne reflects that 'No man, not even her father, could draw affection so easily. It was not only Nehru's handsome features, mobile expressions, elegance, warm smile, and easy relaxed manner. There was also an inner spirit that defied description. Even his sudden flashes of rage at some injustice or stupid inefficiency had a humanity and warmth about them and were soon over'.

A later chapter features a reception at the Prime Minister's house, in honour of the visiting violinist Yehudi Menuhin. Here, Nehru charmed Caroline and Elizabeth by telling them 'the



history of some of the great women of India's past. Of the Hindu princesses who had led their armies against the Moghul invaders; of great seers and holy women; of Sanskrit poetesses. As he spoke his brown eyes were alight and, although other guests around were listening to the beautifully modulated voice, Caroline felt that he was speaking to her alone as he related a particular tale'.

The admiration was apparently shared by the head of the household. Thus, as they drove past beggars and lepers in the streets of the capital, Sir Ronald was moved to comment: 'That's what Nehru is up against. Some of his own people could do more to help, after all'.

The novel is set against the backdrop of India's humiliating defeat in the war with China in 1962. Some months after the event, Nehru walks Caroline through his garden, where he introduces her to the panda gifted him in better times by the Chinese Prime Minister, Chou En-Lai. As they admire the animal, Nehru, remarks: 'My error was to think that the word of a man of honour is sufficient'. Then he adds: 'He is a man of honour, Chou En-Lai. Of that I am still certain; however, no-one can tell the pressures a man is under from his own colleagues, how much decision rests in his hands once he returns to the political medley of his country'.

The conversation then continues:

[Nehru]: 'You know, dear lady, I have had much sorrow recently. I suffer with my people—all those families bereft, thousands wounded. So much I have wanted to do for my country, but only in peace can there be constructive achievement'.

[Caroline]: 'There is so much you have done already. The caste system abolished, the position of women...'

[Nehru]: 'Yes, yes'. Impatiently, he interrupted her. 'All in the name of the law, but in the hearts of the people?'

Later, as the walk and conversation draws to a close, Nehru says; 'We each have to work towards our destiny. We are born with it; some of us never achieve it. At least I have endeavoured to fulfil mine. I try not to feel that I have failed entirely'.

The novel's epilogue fast forwards to the 1990s, by which time Elizabeth has grown-up children herself. Her eighteen-year-old son gets his grandmother talking about their years in India. Then he asks: 'What was Nehru really like? You knew him well, didn't you?'. Caroline replies: 'He was a great man, truly great. Not just a good ruler in the ordinary sense. He could have been a dictator, you know. He could sway a crowd of a million with the modulation of his voice, the charm of his manner, and he was handsome, very handsome—his feelings, each change of mood, reflected in his face as he talked'.

She continues: 'Not everyone liked him, of course. He had political enemies, and men who were jealous of him. He didn't suffer fools gladly, either. He could be cutting at times, even with

women. But he was a wonderful man, all the same. He kept all the best things the British had left and yet was a great patriot: democracy, the British parliamentary system, freedom of speech, of religion, independent status for women.'

Later, the talk turns to the fate of Nehru's country of and his family, the untimely deaths of Sanjay, Indira, and Rajiv. When the grandson asks whether it was 'a sort of curse on the whole dynasty', Lady Caroline replies: 'Yes, and yet Indira caused her own demise. Panditji would never have shot down the Sikhs in their traditional temple. She lacked her father's tolerance, his breadth of vision, and his charm'.

The portrait of Nehru in this novel rings true. Claire Crocker captures his charm and charisma, his respect for democracy and diversity, his unique place in the history of his country. The cynic might however say that what the novel really reveals is the appeal that Nehru had for a certain kind of Western woman.

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### **SEARCHING FOR CHARLIE**

It was on my last trip to Kolkata that I went searching for the grave of Charlie Andrews. A friend had told me that it was in a cemetery on Lower Circular Road. I decided to walk there from my hotel in Park Street. Fortunately, it was winter, so the weather was (relatively) mild. More fortunately, I had as my companion the historian Mukul Kesavan, who (difficult though this may be for readers of The Telegraph to believe) is even more interesting to listen to in person than he is to read in print.

Mukul lived his first five years in Kolkata. I had spent exactly the same time in the city, also at a stretch. Since this was when I was an adult, he generously allowed me to be the guide. I walked confidently down Russell and Little Russell Street to reach the Lower Circular Road. We then, on my advice, turned left, and walked under the flyover that wasn't there when I was in the city. We passed Hazra Road and Landsdowne Road, but there was no sign of any cemetery. I told Mukul that it must be further down, near where I knew some other Christian institutions to be (such as La Martiniere, and Bishop's College). We walked on, past the curve which gives the road its middle name, but we still couldn't find it.

By now the sun was out, and we were sweating. We pushed on, because we had started, and because the person we were in search of meant something to us. Charles Freer Andrews was a priest from Cambridge who had identified completely with India and Indians. When he died in Kolkata in April 1940, his close friend Mohandas K. Gandhi wrote that while the numerous misdeeds of the English would be forgotten, 'not one of the heroic deeds of Andrews will be forgotten as long as England and India live'. 'If we really love Andrews' memory', said Gandhi,

then ‘we may not have hate in us for Englishmen, of whom Andrews was among the best and noblest. It is possible, quite possible, for the best Englishmen and the best Indians to meet together and never to separate till they have evolved a formula acceptable to both. The legacy left by Andrews is worth the effort. That is the thought that rules me whilst I contemplate the benign face of Andrews and what innumerable deeds of love he performed so that India may take her independent place among the nations of the earth.’

The next year, Andrews garnered more heart-felt praise from his other close friend, Rabindranath Tagore. In April 1941, Tagore gave what turned out to be his last major lecture—in fact, it had to be read out for him, since he was too ill. It was entitled ‘Crisis in Civilization’. Here, Tagore chastised the British for their imperial arrogance, before adding: ‘And yet it has been my privilege to come in contact with big-hearted Englishmen of surpassing goodness, and it is on account of them that I have not lost faith in the people to whom they belonged. There was Andrews, for instance; in him I had for a very close friend an Englishman, a real Christian and a gentleman. We in India are indebted to Andrews for many acts of love and devotion. But speaking from a personal angle, I am especially grateful to him for this reason: he helped me to regain in my old age some of that sincere respect for the British people which I had acquired in my youth under the power of their literature. The memory of Andrews perpetuates for me the nobility in the British heart. I have counted men like him as my own intimate friends and they are friends of all humanity. To have known such men was for me an enrichment of my life. It is they who will save British honour from shipwreck....’

Mukul Kesavan and I knew what Andrews had meant to the two greatest of modern Indians. We knew also of his work on behalf of indentured labourers in Fiji, Africa, and the Caribbean, for which he was given the title,

‘Deenbandhu’, friend of the poor. But Andrews also spoke more directly to us, because of his connection with our college, St. Stephen’s. For some, this old Delhi institution is identified with social privilege and Christian intolerance. That is certainly one side of the College, but there is another side too, which emphasizes social commitment and religious pluralism, and which, in the present as in the past, is identified with the memory and example of Charlie Andrews.

Andrews taught at St. Stephen’s for ten years, declining the job of Principal so that an Indian (S. K. Rudra) could be elevated in his place. To look for Andrews’s grave was thus, for Mukul and me, to pay homage to the best traditions of our college. And so we walked on, past the Park Street cemetery which housed the bodies of those who were once rich and famous (and always white), in search of the other place where our man lay buried. At last, after an hour on the road, we saw a handsome red church. This, we thought, must surely be it.

As we entered the church we saw an old Anglo-Indian lady walking out. We asked her where the graveyard was. She answered that there was none in this church; however, a free-standing, so to say unattached, cemetery, did lie in the direction from which we had come. We retraced our

steps, and, walking more slowly this time, scrutinized every wall for an entrance to tombstones within. After about twenty minutes we found the graveyard. We had missed it on our way up because it was on the other side of the road.

At the entrance to the Lower Circular Road Cemetery is a large board guiding the visitor to where the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt is buried. Within sight is a smaller and neater sign, marking the last resting place of our good fellow Stephanian. I had once seen a wonderful photograph of Charlie Andrews, hanging at the entrance to the main library in Visva-Bharati. The decency of the man was captured in his dress and posture; his manifest kindliness, in his shining eyes. A photograph is of course more evocative than a sculpture; that said, the bust of Andrews here was quite nice too, with his broad face and beard chiselled to give a fair idea of how he actually looked.

We walked round the cemetery, to notice the names of those buried there—a fair sprinkling of Basus, Mitters, and Mullicks, the odd Gomes and Menezes, and (in a nice and very Kolkata touch) a Patricia Wong. A cricket ball's throw away lay the Park Street Cemetery, where lay associates of Warren Hastings, Governors, and Generals. There were other English graveyards in the city, but naturally Andrews lay with the Indians. Another lovely touch was provided by the boys who ran in and out of the line of graves, chasing the kites they had brought with them to fly this Sunday, in one of the few open spaces left in the centre of an old and very crowded city.

Before we left, we visited Andrews's grave once more. We read the lettering on the bust—this told us it had been recently installed, by the Old Boys of the College, with the unveiling done by a man whom I recognized to be the most distinguished Old Stephanian then resident in Kolkata. The likeness, as I said, was close; but a somewhat jarring note was provided by an aluminium sheet that had been hung above it. Mukul remarked that the protection was well intentioned but inappropriate. A man who had identified with the humblest and most vulnerable would not have minded if his gravestone was subject to periodic droppings from the winged creatures of creation.

## **THE GOOD INDIAN**

One of the forgotten figures of Indian journalism is a man named Syed Abdullah Brelvi. Google 'SA Brelvi' (as I just did), and all that comes up is a road carrying that name in south Bombay. The road was so named in a more enlightened age, when Mumbaikars were free, and willing, to praise those who were not Hindu, and not Maharashtrian either. For Brelvi's contributions to his adopted city were of a very high order. Originally from the U. P. (as his last name indicates), he came to Bombay to find work as a journalist. In 1924 he was appointed editor of the Bombay Chronicle, which had been set up, a decade previously, as a nationalist

rival to the English-owned Times of India. He stayed in that job until his death, eighteen years later.

The role of Brelvi and his newspaper in promoting the freedom struggle is documented in Milton Israel's book *Communications and Power*. The Bombay Chronicle gave early support to Gandhi's campaign against untouchability. It reported sensitively on the living conditions of the textile workers of the city. Like the metropolis of which it was part, the newspaper's concerns were not merely political—thus its sports pages were superb, and it extensively covered the Hindi film industry as well.

Brelvi became editor of the Bombay Chronicle at a time when the freedom struggle was at a crossroads. During the non-co-operation movement of 1920-2 Hindus and Muslims, North Indians and South Indians, had all flocked to the Mahatma's call. But now that unity was coming apart, with individuals returning to the comfort, and insularity, of the communities to which they had originally belonged.

As a patriot whose own life transcended his personal identity, Brelvi was particularly despairing of this trend. In an editorial published in the Bombay Chronicle on 26th May 1926 (and quoted in Israel's book) he asked this poignant and still profoundly relevant question: 'If a modern Diogenes were to hunt out for Indians with his lantern in these days, he would be sure to come across fervid Hindus, bigoted Muslims and fanatical souls deeply engrossed with the problem of tirelessly finding out how unjustly their own particular community was being treated, and he would have to ask in sorrow: "Where are the Indians"?'.

I was reminded of Brelvi's question when reading a letter recently published in Outlook magazine. The magazine had carried an obituary of that other freedom-fighter-turned-editor, H. Y. Sharada Prasad. The correspondent complained that the tribute had overlooked what to him was Sharada Prasad's greatest flaw—namely, his lack of commitment to his fellow Kannadigas. In forty years of living in Delhi, he grumbled, twenty of those spent working with Prime Ministers, Sharada Prasad had never granted any special favours to those who spoke his own language.

What that correspondent saw as a weakness, some others had come to see as the deceased man's singular strength. Born in 1924, Sharada Prasad was a toddler when Brelvi asked that question: 'Where are the Indians?'. But from his days in high school until his death sixty-five years later, Sharada Prasad's conduct was such as to leave no doubt in anyone's mind about his principal identity: This was an Indian. This did not mean that he was not attached to his own culture and traditions. Indeed, he had forgotten more about Kannada literature than that correspondent to Outlook had ever known. He had translated Shivarama Karanth's works into English, thus rendering a far greater service to his fellow Kannadigas than he would have done by getting them government jobs or appointments with Indira Gandhi.

Sharada Prasad's background was musical as well as literary. His father was a famous composer in the Carnatic tradition; his nephew is a leading member of the popular band, Indian Ocean. Sharada Prasad had a fabulous knowledge of Hindustani classical music himself. The greatest writers and singers of modern Karnataka—Shivarama Karanth, D. R. Bendre, Gangubhai Hangal, Mallikarjun Mansur, et. al.—had often stayed at his home, and partaken of his friendship and his wife Kamala's hospitality.

Apart from his mastery of Kannada, Sharada Prasad was fluent in English, Tamil, and Telugu, and he knew some Hindi and Sanskrit as well. In his life and work, he deepened the ties that bound his own state to the states that bordered it, even as he more strongly embedded the South in the great if sometimes troubled country of which it was a part. This was a good Kannadiga who was a better Indian.

The quality of Sharada Prasad's Indian-ness was beautifully expressed in a letter he wrote his parents on his 19th birthday. He was then in jail, as a consequence of his participation in the Quit India movement. The excerpts that follow are from a translation by Sugata Srinivasaraju:

'Many did not expect my life to take this turn. However, inside me, I often felt that I would one day be a soldier in the freedom struggle. ... Whatever pride I can justly corner for my new life I shall stake claim. But this pride shall not be misplaced or cause self-love. On the other hand it will only strengthen my sense of self-dedication....

... When we met sometime ago, you had expressed concern that the environment of constant strife in the prison may have an adverse effect on me....On the contrary, I feel prison life has led me to dispassionately think about human nature and its various attributes. Through this I have begun to understand more clearly the greatness and importance of human decency and the devotion with which one needs to pursue it.'

Once he came out of prison, and finished his studies, Sharada Prasad went to Bombay and became a journalist. Later, he moved to Delhi, first to edit the journal of the Planning Commission, Yojana, and then to serve as information adviser to successive Prime Ministers. In retirement he began a newspaper column that acquired a devoted readership. Here, rarely spoke of his time close to power—rather, he wrote about literature and music and the arts, his knowledge made accessible and humanized by an understated tone and a self-deprecatory wit.

A friend of mine once described Sharada Prasad as 'the thinking man's Khushwant Singh'. The characterization was accurate as well as incomplete. For the scholarship was subordinated to an integrity of character and a selfless commitment to the country that he shared with his readers. This quiet, learned, dignified, and always decent man was, above all else, an Indian.

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## THE GANDHI RESERVOIR

For many years now, my principal teacher on the subject of Mohandas K. Gandhi has been a man who is only incidentally his grandson. To be sure, Gopal Krishna Gandhi does respect and honour the memory of his two grandfathers (the other being C. Rajagopalachari). But his own identity is by no means restricted to the genes he carries. He has written a fine novel in English (Refuge, set in the tea estates of Sri Lanka), translated (into Hindi) Vikram Seth's mammoth A Suitable Boy, founded the now enormously influential Nehru Centre in London, and served as an inspirational High Commissioner in post-apartheid South Africa. At the time of writing he is (in the words of the economist Amartya Sen) 'the enormously popular Governor of West Bengal'. In between (and before) these literary and public duties, he has acquired a deep understanding of modern Indian history, and of the freedom struggle in particular

Over the past two decades, Gopal (as I must, in defiance of protocol, call him) has done me countless good turns. He has directed me to books I did not know of, and clarified doubts relating to Gandhi and the national movement. He is, as it were, my own personalized Wikipedia: like that site he donates his knowledge without a fee, although unlike it he never makes a mistake. Over the years, this column would have contained far more errors had I not had the good fortune to count this outstandingly gifted (and generous) Indian as a friend.

Not long after I first met Gopal, I was due to travel to New York. He suggested that, in view of my interests, I meet someone named Enuga S. Reddy, whom he described as a stalwart of the anti-apartheid struggle. Thus, on a cold, dark, winter evening in New York, I called on a tall, erect, soft-spoken man who for more than twenty years had directed the United Nations Centre against Apartheid. In this time, Mr Reddy worked ceaselessly to wean the Western world away from its support to the racist regime in South Africa, by writing petitions, organizing conferences, lobbying leaders, and hosting South Africans in exile. When we met, in 1992, the struggle had more or less succeeded. Mandela was out of jail, the African National Congress (ANC) was no longer banned, and the first democratic elections were being planned.

Among progressive circles in South Africa E. S. Reddy was (and is) venerated. Some top leaders of the ANC counted him as a friend. So did many lesser activists. I recently met a young man who works in an office of the United Nations in Pretoria (an office that could not have existed during apartheid), and when I mentioned Mr Reddy's name, he sat up straight, instinctively, as a mark of respect to a man whom his father and uncle had visited when in exile and who he had himself later met as a free South African.

Sometime in the 1980s, after he had retired from the U. N., E. S. Reddy began to develop a serious interest in Mahatma Gandhi. It was, at it were, a sort of homecoming, for in his native Andhra he had grown up in a family of Gandhians. He began to scour libraries in Europe and North America for rare materials on or by Gandhi. Later, after the demise of apartheid, his search was extended to libraries and archives in South Africa as well.

Over the past twenty years, E. S. Reddy has collected tens of thousands of pages of new material, including many letters by Gandhi not in his Collected Works, records of his law practice, government reports about his activities, tributes to and interviews with him published in French, German, English, and other languages. Mr Reddy has generously donated copies to archives in India, South Africa, and the United States. Meanwhile, he has himself produced a stream of important books on Gandhi's relations with Americans, Europeans, and South Africans.

Gopal Gandhi has called E. S. Reddy a 'Gandhi-reservoir', a 'one-man Open University on Mahatma Gandhi'. His generosity is legendary; so, too, is his energy. At the age of eighty-two, he made an arduous journey to New Delhi to help the Government of India resolve the mother of all messes created by a careless (and possibly malevolent) reworking of the standard edition of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. A year later I met him at Yale University, where, having taken a train from New York, he had come to deposit new materials on South Africa. Great institutions have benefited from his goodness and wisdom; so, too, have very many ordinary individuals. Every so often, I get an email from Mr Reddy with an attachment containing documents on or about Gandhi that I have not seen or heard of before.

While giving thus to India and Indians, Mr Reddy continues to give to his adopted continent as well. Surfing the Web, I found an account of his work for a website called Aluka.org, which is a digital library of scholarly resources about Africa. In September 2007 Mr Reddy gave lunch in an Indian restaurant in New York to a representative of Aluka named Angelique Mahal. She later wrote in a blog: 'I was ready yesterday to return to him a book he lent to me and he told me to keep it for now and to keep reading it. While we have worked quite closely together these past months I had once mentioned that I previously lived and worked in Burkina Faso, and yesterday he brought me a special report section on Burkina that was in a recent Financial Times. He also gave me a book he edited on Gandhi's speeches and signed it to my friend Angelique. E.S. isn't only a partner for [our] project, he has become a friend and mentor to me.'

As he has been to this writer as well. For, among the many debts I owe Gopal Gandhi, that introduction to E. S. Reddy may very well be the greatest.

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### **THE INDIAN MOTHER'S DREAM SON-IN-LAW**

Although I have been a cricket-nut since childhood, and have written several hundred columns on the sport, I count only one Test cricketer—Bishan Singh Bedi—as a friend, and have a passing acquaintance with only a few others. The two letters I have written to cricketers were both addressed to residents of my home town, Bangalore. The second of these letters (the time has not yet come to reveal the first) was written exactly a year ago. Sent to the captain of the Indian cricket team, it read, in full:



‘Dear Anil,

I wanted to write immediately the Test ended, to congratulate you on your brave defiance of the Australian bowling. If some of our regular batsmen had shown an iota of your commitment and courage, we would have drawn the Test, regardless of the umpiring. I am glad I did not write rightaway, however, for in the days after the Test you have behaved impeccably. The dignity with which you have comported yourself, and the restrained tone of your remarks, have been in sharp and shining contrast to the public and on-field displays of the other cricketers in this saga. You have brought credit to yourself, to the game of cricket, and to India.

with regards

Ram.’

If a week is a long time in politics, then a year is an eternity in the world of cricket. Drowned out by the din of the Indian Premier League, barely remembering even this most recent home series against Australia, readers may need to be reminded of the context of my letter. In the winter of 2007-8, India were set to play four Tests Down Under. They were badly beaten in the first Test in Melbourne, but acquitted themselves more creditably in the second, played in Sydney. At one stage the Indian bowlers had the Australians on the ropes, but then the umpire failed to hear an edge, the error allowing the batsman (Andrew Symonds) to go on to make a century.

Anyway, once Symonds had made his ton, India were left to bat the whole of the last day to save the match. This they might still have done, had it not been for more disgraceful umpiring, whereby Dravid was wrongly given out caught at the wicket, and Ganguly was sent packing on the word of an Australian fielder who had scooped the ball up on the half-volley. As those wickets fell—legitimately or illegitimately—Anil Kumble battled for three hours in an unavailing bid to save the match.

After the last wicket was claimed, the Australians celebrated as if a World War had been won. (Their behaviour then, and afterwards, compelled the normally restrained Peter Roebuck to dub them a ‘pack of wild dogs’.) The Indian captain, on the other hand, was as dignified in defeat as he had been resolute on the field. Hence my letter to him, which, a day or two later, elicited this reply:

‘Dear Ram,

Thanks for your wishes and continued support. I am confident that our team will be able to put up a better performance in the remainder [of the] matches and it will be really nice to read a 2-2 scoreline at the end of this series.

Regards

Anil’

Kumble's reply renewed my admiration for his courage, but opened doubts about his judgement. For the next Test was to be played at Perth, on a fast, bouncy surface where visiting batsmen were notoriously vulnerable and the home team's bowlers were, well, like a pack of wild dogs picking on a defenceless goat. Australia had not lost a Test at Perth for eighteen years. How did the Indian captain think he could reverse this?

My knowledge of cricket is mostly theoretical and academic, but even those with a hundred Test matches under their belt—such as the members of Channel 9's commentary team—were as convinced as I that Perth would see the Australians go three-up in the series. But somehow, the Indian captain communicated some of his extraordinary self-belief to the members of his team. By batting and bowling out of their skins, Kumble's men defeated the Australians by the margin of 72 runs.

Given the horrors of Sydney, and how the Perth pitch has always behaved, this victory probably counts as the greatest ever by an Indian cricket team. It is hard to see how it could have happened had Kumble not been in charge. Only he had the necessary force of character to lift his men out of the trough, and make them play, against the odds and the run of play, in the manner that they did.

A defining moment of that Perth Test was the sight of Saurav Ganguly fielding at short-leg. That particular position has long been reserved—in Indian teams at any rate—for the youngest member of the team. That a long-time captain and Test veteran would now occupy it was testimony to the extraordinary regard in which Kumble was held. Four former Indian captains were here playing under him (the others were Tendulkar, Dravid, and Dhoni), and yet giving it their all—only because they so massively and unreservedly respected the man in charge.

Anil Kumble has taken more Test wickets than any other Indian bowler. He has also (although this is a fact less often noticed) won more Test matches for India than even Sachin Tendulkar. But his cricketing genius apart, Kumble should also be remembered as perhaps the most courageous cricketer to have played for India. We cricket-nuts salute his wicket-taking, his dogged batsmanship down the order, and his fine captaincy. But we should pay heed to the uprightness of his character as well. In his person, an exceptionally high degree of intelligence is married to an equally high level of integrity. I once heard a cricket-illiterate lady of my acquaintance remark of Anil Kumble that he was 'every Indian mother's dream son-in-law'. This may be the oddest tribute that has ever come his way—and possibly the handsomest, too.

### **A FORGOTTEN BENGALI HERO**

Nothing gives the historian greater joy than to discover an individual significant in his time but forgotten in our own. I was thus very pleased to have brought, to the attention of the present generation, the achievements of a Bengali mathematician-turned-civil servant named

Sukumar Sen. He is one of the heroes of my book *India after Gandhi*, for having designed and supervised this country's first ever General Elections. The Election Commission has since been a stable and very impressive feature of the Indian political landscape, and later Commissioners such as T. N. Seshan and J. M. Lyngdoh have been widely praised for their conduct of free and fair elections. But the man who began it all, the Bengali who laid the foundations of one of the core institutions of Indian democracy, had never, before my book appeared in 2007, got his due.

So I believed, until in a bookshop in Bangalore last month I came across some old issues of *Shankar's Weekly*. This periodical, now defunct, was edited out of Delhi by the cartoonist K. Shankar Pillai, and was once very popular among the English-speaking middle class. Anyway, in its issue of 17th February 1957, the magazine chose Sukumar Sen as 'The Man of the Week' for having successfully conducted his, and India's, second General Election. *Shankar's Weekly* described the man and his work in these four paragraphs of orotund prose:

'Sukumar Sen could easily have been a bit of the Steel Frame that rusted, for he was a District and Sessions Judge for 19 years. That he brought to August 1947 the resilience that made him Chief Secretary to the very difficult Government of Bengal was due undoubtedly to the fact that he had much more than steel in his frame. Bengal in the war years was almost a lost province and when division rent it, what seemed to be wholly ripped off was the morale of the administration. While the White scooted, many a Brown Sahib collapsed in a din of scandal.

Sukumar Sen's Chief Secretaryship for three years, on the other hand, seemed to prepare him for the most unconventional job that ever came to an I. C. S. man. He was chosen to play obstetrician and to deliver Indian democracy's first crop of nearly three thousand elected representatives. Realising with surprising un-I. C. S. humility that democracy likes its mechanics to be as self-effacing as possible, the Chief Election Commissioner became an unseen, undogmatic influence patiently judicial in his attitude to parties but insistent in regard to the machine he wielded.

Where nearly two hundred million people, for the most part unlettered but politically conscious none the less, are set on choosing between one phenomenally big party and a clutter of many small and new ones, where words have come to be replaced by symbols, where a corps of workers recruited ad-hoc from a thousand offices with no experience of applied democracy have to face an army of agents both suspicious and persistent, the actual process of election can be very wearing.

But largely due to Sukumar Sen it can be said that apart from Panch Shila the most impressive gift we have given to Asia in the first decade of our freedom is the system of elections that has been perfected in this country. His success was recognised internationally when he was asked to organise the first Sudan elections. As the voters get ready to clutch at the voting papers for the second Indian general elections, every Political party has reason to remember Sukumar Sen with gratitude for doing a very difficult job very well indeed'.

Let me now juxtapose to this tribute by Shankar's Weekly some material I recently found at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. It so happened that after the first Indian General Elections, our Chief Election Commissioner was asked to supervise elections in the newly independent country of Sudan. He spent nine months in that country, setting up the infrastructure for polling and making sure it worked. It was Sukumar Sen who had devised the system of identifying parties by different symbols and colours—this method was now adapted to the Sudanese voter, who, like his Indian counterpart, was mostly illiterate.

On the 14th of December 1953, after the elections were completed, Sen spoke on Sudanese radio of this 'very happy chapter of my life'. He exhorted the people to trust their politicians, who, he said, were all 'wise and patriotic'; in Government or in the Opposition, 'you will find them all working for the ultimate good of the country'. But he warned them that in view of Sudan's underdevelopment they would 'have to work very very hard for many long years' to nurture the plant they, and he, had sown. Still, he hoped that their experiment in free elections would be 'an example and a source of inspiration to the Arab and the African world'.

Sen's work in the Sudan was the subject of a stirring tribute in the Egyptian newspaper, *Al Misri*. In its issue of 18th December 1953, it called the Indian 'one of those men who were born to lead the pitched battles for Democracy'. It condemned the cynicism of British officials and the British press, which had a priori dismissed the elections as a farce. For under Sen's supervision the Sudanese polls had been 'free in every sense of the word'. Indeed, the singular lesson of their success was that 'the age in which the politicians of the British Empire used to think that they are issuing orders, is finished'.

Like his Egyptian admirers, Sen was also to question whether democracy was a Western invention at all. In his final report on the Indian elections, he argued that in fact 'republican forms of government existed in many parts of ancient India'. In 'some of these republics, every adult male member had the right to vote and to be present in the general assembly which decided all public affairs'. The 'genius of India', said Sen, had fashioned 'autonomous and almost self-sufficient village communities' which had 'lasted through the ages', and were 'run on truly democratic lines without, of course, the outward trappings of the vote and the ballot box'. From this point of view, the elections of 1952 were 'like the rejoining of a historic thread that had been snapped by alien rule'.

Sen was romantic in his belief that electoral democracy was a product of the 'genius of India'; it was, in fact, a modern implant from the West. As it happened, Sudan did not hold another General Election. But India did, and this, like the previous one, was supervised by Sukumar Sen himself. By and through his work in the 1952 and 1957 elections this decent Bengali had done enough to count as one of the builders of the Indian nation. This was recognized by Shankar's Weekly at the time, but apparently not by very many others. For his name then slipped from public memory, and Indians who voted in elections in the 1960s and 1970s and beyond, as well

as journalists and political scientists who commented on the electoral process, knew not the name of the man who had made it all possible.

Back in 1957, Shankar's Weekly had argued that along with the philosophy of Panchsheel, free elections were India's greatest gift to Asia. No one believes in Panchsheel anymore, but electoral democracy has endured. It is, as it were, India's greatest gift to itself. For while politicians in India are now anything but wise or patriotic, their misdeeds are kept somewhat in check by the mighty machine forged and welded by Sukumar Sen. Perhaps it is time that his fellow Bengalis properly honoured him. They might wish to name a major street in Kolkata after him. Or they might press the Government of India to confer on him a posthumous Bharat Ratna, to which his claims are far stronger than of some previous recipients of that award.

### **RAJIV RE-ASSESSED**

I think it was Voltaire who said that while we can flatter the living, the dead deserve nothing less than the truth. I recalled that injunction when reading Vir Sanghvi's tribute to the late Rajiv Gandhi (Remembering Rajiv, HT, Sunday 7th February). This praises Mr Gandhi as a compassionate visionary who helped heal the wounds of a divided nation and then gave it a charter for the future. Mr Gandhi's achievements are marked and celebrated. At the same time, no failure or flaw is admitted.

Mr Sanghvi's one-sided approach is (as I shall presently show) at odds with the historical record. But it is also at odds with his own record as a political analyst. I have long admired Mr Sanghvi for the elegance of his prose and the independence of his opinions. He refuses to see the world in black and white. Unlike many other Indian liberals, he is honest enough to criticize Muslim bigots as harshly and as often as the bigots of his own faith.

In this particular instance, however, Mr Sanghvi has shown a conspicuous lack of historical judgement. Consider this statement, which appears early in his column: 'It was Rajiv Gandhi's five years in office... that showed the world that India was here to stay. We had our problems. But our survival was not in doubt'.

This is an audacious claim, that does serious violence to our history, and gross injustice to those who actually assured India's survival as a free and democratic nation. These were our first generation of nation-builders, Nehru, Patel, Ambedkar, and others, who forged a nation from a thousand different fragments, against a backdrop of famine and civil war, and then gave it a democratic constitution and a plural political culture. By the time India held its second General Elections, in 1957, it had successfully confounded the Western sceptics who claimed that it was too diverse and divided to survive as a single nation. At this time, if memory serves, Rajiv Gandhi was playing with his Meccano set.

Mr Sanghvi makes much of Rajiv Gandhi's modest means. 'He was the first Prime Minister to have ever held a job', he writes, 'to have watched with alarm as his provident fund deduction went up and to have struggled to make ends meet'. This he contrasts with 'the unexplained wealth of political families'. Once more, one is obliged to remind him that Indian history did not begin in 1984. Rajagopalachari, Patel, Ambedkar and many others gave up lucrative legal careers to serve the nation. Then, speaking of Prime Ministers, there was a certain Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was so poor that he had to swim across the Ganges to college since he could not afford to pay for a ticket on the boat. Austerity and integrity were for a very long time the very hallmark of Indian politics. If Rajiv Gandhi is to be compared to the politicians who followed in his wake, then he must also be compared with those who came before him.

Mr Sanghvi exaggerates when he says that 'the only reason India is a software power today is because he [Rajiv] had the vision to see the future' (other reasons include the emphasis on technical education in the 1960s, the nurturing of domestic capability after IBM was kicked out in the 1970, and, of course, the entrepreneurial drive of the 1990s). However, the most remarkable thing about his column is not what he says but what he is silent about. Among the words missing from his assessment of Rajiv Gandhi's record in office are Shah Bano, Ayodhya, and Kashmir.

In April 1985, in awarding alimony to a divorced woman named Shah Bano, the Supreme Court called for honouring the Constitutional commitment to a Uniform Civil Code. The Congress had a two-thirds majority in Parliament. However, instead of taking the Court's verdict forward, Rajiv Gandhi had a bill passed overturning it. Less than a year later, the locks of the shrine in the Babri Masjid were opened. As the political analyst Neerja Chowdhury wrote at the time, 'Mr Rajiv Gandhi wants both to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds'. Chowdhury remarked that 'a policy of appeasement of both communities being pursued by the government for electoral gains is a vicious cycle which will become difficult to break'.

This was a prophetic warning. A quarter-century later, Indians are still living with the consequences of those altogether disastrous acts. The BJP won a mere two seats in the 1984 General Elections; helped by the appeasement of the mullahs and the concession in Ayodhya, they marched on to become a national party. The rise of Hindu fundamentalism encouraged the Muslim fundamentalists, leading to the cycle of riots, bombs, and more riots that is now apparently a permanent feature of the Indian political landscape. The religious polarization has been hastened by the rise of the insurgency in Kashmir, in whose making, too, Rajiv Gandhi's Government played a part, by its rigging of the 1987 elections, among whose defeated candidates were some future leaders of the jihad.

One person who would certainly have disapproved of Rajiv Gandhi's twin capitulation was India's first Prime Minister. After Partition, Jawaharlal Nehru's principal aim was to ensure that India did not become a 'Hindu Pakistan'. In the country's inaugural General Election, his party's main plank was the safeguarding of the secular fabric of the Republic. The tone was set by

Nehru's first election speech, at Ludhiana, where he declared 'an all-out war against communalism'. He 'condemned the communal bodies which in the name of Hindu and Sikh culture were spreading the virus of communalism as the Muslim League once did...'. These 'sinister communal elements' would if they came to power 'bring ruin and death to the country'.

As the leading liberal born in a Hindu home, Nehru keenly understood the importance of encouraging liberal tendencies in traditions other than his own. He had hoped that Sheikh Abdullah would be the voice of progress and reason among Indian Muslims, but the Sheikh had other ambitions. Then Nehru put his faith in the brilliant, Cambridge-educated scholar, Saifuddin Tyabji. Tragically, Tyabji died in his early forties, just as he was making his mark in Parliament.

In the 1950s, Ambedkar, as Law Minister, and Nehru, as Prime Minister, reformed the personal laws of Hindus, allowing Hindu women to choose their marriage partners, to divorce, and to own property. They believed that when Muslims were more secure and had developed a liberal leadership of their own, such reforms would be made to their archaic laws, too. The conjunction that Ambedkar and Nehru had hoped for finally arrived in 1985. Rajiv Gandhi had 400 MPs, a Supreme Court verdict, and a liberal Muslim willing to bat for him (Arif Mohammed Khan). That he still funk'd it may be attributed either to a lack of a sense of history or a lack of a robust commitment to liberal principles—or perhaps both.

I do not want to make the reverse mistake, of seeing Rajiv Gandhi's record in office as wholly flawed. He did reconcile the Mizos, he did encourage technological innovation, and he did promote panchayati raj (a contribution strangely unmentioned by Mr Sanghvi). At the same time, his policies encouraged the most reactionary elements among Hindus and Muslims, whose rivalry has since promoted a huge amount of discord and violence, the very discord and violence that Mr Sanghvi himself, in other columns, has tried bravely to combat.

### **A MAESTRO IN MANIPUR**

If the mast-head of this newspaper was long enough, or if the type it uses was smaller, this column could have carried the title: 'MEETING A MAESTRO ON A MISTY MORNING IN MANIPUR'.

Over the past decade, the little and beautiful state of Manipur has replaced the larger and even more beautiful state of Nagaland as the second most troubled part of India (the Kashmir Valley, of course, being the first). Other insurgencies in modern India have been, for the most part, a straight contest—between the insurgents and the Indian state. True, the rebels have had their factions, but these are all united by the dream, or fantasy, of taking their territory out of India to construct a new, sovereign, nation. In Manipur, on the other hand, there are three distinct insurgencies in simultaneous operation.

The first insurgency is led and staffed by the Meiteis of the Imphal Valley. This seeks to make the whole of Manipur, as it now stands, into an independent nation-state. The second insurgency is promoted by Thangkul Nagas who wish to merge their districts into a Greater Nagaland, or Nagalim, this to likewise exist outside the framework of the Indian Constitution. The third insurgency is the handiwork of the Kukis, another group of hill tribes who are less than satisfied with what they see as domination by the Meiteis. The Kuki radicals hold out not for complete independence but rather for a new state of their own within the Union of India.

As in Kashmir, or in past times in Punjab, these rebels are divided among themselves. Each major insurgency has several major factions, each identified by a long acronym, each claiming to speak most authentically for the community (or nation) in the making. By one count there are ten armed groups operating in Manipur; by another count, fourteen. As in other parts of the north-east, these militants fund themselves from exactions from the public and, on occasion, from the state.

In a recent visit to Manipur I did not meet a single insurgent. But I did hear a great deal of their doings. Their exactions were resented; but so, too, was the massive and at times overbearing presence of the Army. My host, a professor of economics, took me one morning to the Kangla Fort, an enclosed campus in the heart of the city. Until very recently this had been the headquarters of the Assam Rifles, which, of all armed groups in the region, must be the most disliked. It was outside Kangla that, in July 2004, a group of Meitei women protested in the most spectacular fashion, by covering their naked bodies with a piece of cloth reading: 'INDIAN ARMY, TAKE OUR FLESH!' (a photograph capturing this protest was reproduced in The Telegraph ).

The Indian Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh, visited Imphal shortly after this incident. At his initiative, the Assam Rifles were made to leave Kangla; the place was now being redone as a heritage park. The gesture was appreciated; it touched the Manipuris in that most sensitive place, the heart. But in their daily lives they continue to be subject to the Armed Forces Special Forces Act (AFSPA), under which the Army has the right to stop, search, harass and imprison civilians while being exempt from judicial or executive scrutiny themselves. The professor of economics told me that while freeing Kangla from the troops the Prime Minister should have withdrawn AFSPA as well. Good governance did not admit of half-measures: as the professor put it, 'If you love someone, love them whole-heartedly'.

The Meiteis take a deep pride in their history and traditions (doubtless the various Naga and Kuki groups do, too). Two thousand years of (a sometimes interrupted) state-hood have promoted a fabulously rich cultural life. One evening in Imphal I was treated to a superb performance of tribal and Meitei dance, where the quality of dancing and singing was world-class. I was told—I cannot say on what authority—that it was Rabindranath Tagore who first brought Manipuri dance to wider attention. Apparently he saw a troupe performing in the court



of the King of Tripura, and brought them over to Santiniketan. Soon their art was being showcased in other parts of India.

The Meiteis have an ambivalent relationship with Bengal. Vaishnavism came here in the late medieval period, and after a Meitei king embraced the new faith in the early 17th century, many commoners did so as well. The ancient Mayek script gave way to Bengali lettering. However, the people (and their rulers) continued to follow customs and rituals from the pre-Hindu past. A revivalist movement has gained strength in recent decades. Among its successes has been the official replacement of the Bengali script by the one that preceded it. Among its pyrrhic victories was the burning of the state central library where the teachers and scholars of modern Manipur had learnt to expand their minds. An estimated 145, 000 books went up in the flames.

One reason that Kangla is so precious to the Meiteis is that it was here that the first Manipuri king is said to have been coronated in 33 A. D. The place has a spare, almost desolate, beauty. When I went there, the troops had vacated, but the heritage park was still being prepared. Shrines and palaces were in various stages of restoration. About the only human we saw and spoke to was a priest, lovingly tending a plant.

As we came out of the Fort I heard my host speak a few words to the driver—among them ‘Ratan Thiyam’. I thought then that our next port of call was some other historic place sited near Manipur’s most distinguished contemporary landmark. In fact, we were going to meet the landmark himself.

The approach to Ratan Thiyam’s theatre is very modest indeed. We skirted an open field, and then drove along a dirt road. On the right ran a canal flanked by bamboo; on the left, low houses with matted fences. We stopped outside one such house and got out of the car. We entered a narrow passage lined with posters and cards of performances by Thiyam’s troupe, the Chorus Repertory, which he founded in 1976. The corridor opened out into a broad, well-lit room, where hung a map of the world marking the places where the repertory had performed (these distributed across thirty countries).

We turned out of the building into an open walkway flanked by hedges and shrubs. This path, the length of a cricket pitch, led to a flight of stairs atop which stood a mural depicting different strands of Manipuri culture. Above this mural was another painting, linking the local to the global via scenes drawn from Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic art. The paintings rested on a wall behind which lay a theatre, built to world-class specifications, where the Chorus Repertory practiced and performed.

As we entered the walkway, Ratan Thiyam approached us from the other side. He is a large, impressive man with a very soft step and an even softer voice. He told us how he built the place, inch by inch, plant by plant. The three acre campus was peppered with small, delicate, buildings, one of them a children’s museum. As he spoke, birds chirped away, and raindrops fell. In the middle distance the hills of Manipur loomed.

Ratan Thiyam spoke to us of how modern man was so wholly disconnected from the earth which sustained him. He took Valentine's Day as an example. Its votaries bought flowers wrapped in plastic from a vendor, not knowing (or caring to know) where they came from or where they would finally end. Our global civilization, he said, was committing 'ecological suicide'; it was as doomed as Mohenjodaro or the Incas.

His own presence and example inspires a less despairing reading. That he could conceive and nurture this work of beauty amidst the cross-currents of violence compels not merely admiration but also optimism. So long as the human spirit can give rise to such marvels as Ratan Thiyam and the Chorus Repertory, there is hope for Manipur, for India, and for the world.

### **GANDHI IN ORISSA**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was by birth a Gujarati bania, but the admiration for his life and work transcended the boundaries of caste, language, religion, and gender. He was a man who was trusted by women, a Hindu who reached out to befriend Muslims, and a suvarna who fought for the rights of the lower castes. Above all, he was a Gujarati who was admired by Tamils, Malayalis, Andhras, Kannadigas, Maharashtrians, Hindiwallahs, Punjabis, Bengalis, Assamese, and Oriyas. No Indian, before or since, has had anything like the pan-Indian appeal commanded by Gandhi.

In an essay published in *Subaltern Studies* in the mid 1980s, the historian Shahid Amin tracked the reception of Gandhi by the Awadh peasantry as he made his way through that region. Drawing on letters and exchanges published in a local Hindi newspaper, Amin explored the varying images of the Mahatma. In the eyes of the peasantry he was a patriot, of course, but also a saint, magician, seer, and prophet.

I was reminded of Amin's ground-breaking essay when reading a soon-to-be published collection of recollections of the Mahatma written by residents of Orissa. Between 1921 and 1946 Gandhi visited that eastern state seven times. He was met and escorted by members of the middle class, but also seen and heard by countless Oriyas of less elevated backgrounds, among them barbers, carpenters, peasants, and labourers.

Fortunately, some of those who saw Gandhi recorded their memories in print. The reminiscences come mostly from those who were themselves Oriya speaking; but there are two accounts also by European women who met Gandhi when he came to visit the province. Published in different places and at different times, they have been translated by various hands and collected and edited by the Bhubaneswar-based literary scholar Jatin Kumar Nayak.

Reading this anthology, I was struck by the respect and reverence commanded by Gandhi across different social classes. A group of students pawned a friend's gold chain to pay for the bus

tickets that would allow them to get a glimpse of the Mahatma. Others walked miles and miles for the same privilege. A barber woman, asked to shave Gandhi, borrowed fine jewellery so that she made a proper impression on the divine being in human form. But members of the Indian elite saw him in similar fashion, too. In 1927, Gandhi was on a visit to Cuttack, when the sister of the great Bengali lawyer-patriot C. R. Das came down from Kolkata to help cook his meals. As she told a visitor: 'I came here to meet and serve him. Other religious devotees go to Puri, to Benares, or to Rameswaram. Somewhere, at least once a year, I go to meet Mahatmaji; that is my annual pilgrimage!'

The second thing that struck me was Gandhi's commitment to the abolition of Untouchability. Everywhere he went in Orissa, he spoke out against a pernicious social practice that he regarded as a blot to Hinduism. He urged his upper caste audiences to eat with the lower castes, to help educate them, and to allow them into their temples. As he put in in a speech in Balakati: 'Human vanity lies at the root of untouchability. Like tuberculosis, untouchability consumes human beings. We must not allow ourselves to become victims of this disease. The whole world is watching us. If we do not wash this sin away, people will despise us'.

Ironically, and from his view perhaps regrettably, those who attended Gandhi's meetings came to see him rather than to listen to him. A high school student in Delang later recalled that 'what he said no one seems to understand. But who had come to listen to his speech, anyway? The village women who had assembled there, one tying the end border of her saree to that of another, the daily labourer who had come there foregoing a day's wage, the peasants who had rushed in there, neglecting their fields, would make little sense of Gandhi's speech. They had all come only for a glimpse of the Mahatma. To have set eyes on him for once was all that mattered most to them'.

The people walked miles to see Gandhi, and Gandhi walked miles to speak to them. This book recounts how he traversed through difficult terrain by foot, seeking to reach as many Oriyas as he could. He was a man of indefatigable energy, with a physical strength that his slight frame belied. His readiness to endure hardship, and the simplicity of his life more generally, are certainly in striking contrast to the preferences of those who seek to speak for and represent the people of India at the present time.

As I have noted, many of those who attended Gandhi's meetings simply came to have his darshan; they did not show much interest in his social message. Others more actively opposed it. Thus the orthodox Hindus would not mix or mingle with Dalits, and excluded them from their schools and temples. Visiting Bari in 1934, Gandhi found that his local hosts accepted his 'views on untouchability in principle but they dared not put them in practice for fear of objections from a few sanatani Brahmins'. The Mahatma ruefully observed that 'while [the Indian people] braved the bullets of the British government, they remained scared of Brahmins'.

There are some wonderful moments in this collection. My own favourite is this contrast between the monumental ugliness of Gandhi's human form and the sheer radiance of his human

personality. ‘Gandhiji is ugly’, wrote one woman who came into contact with him: ‘A shaven but bristly scalp with a wispy topknot, a protruding red-blue under lip, big gaps where teeth are missing, large eyes standing out almost at right angles’. Then the account continues: ‘But I see his smile and think him beautiful—the kindest, broadest, sweetest smile! I am aware only of the wave of loving respect going out to him from the surrounding crowd, and of a radiance and immense kindness flooding from him’. The memoirist is Frieda Hauswith, a European artist married to an Oriya, who—after days of trying—was granted the privilege of drawing a sketch of the Mahatma.

This book is published in the year that marks the sixtieth anniversary of Gandhi’s martyrdom. The editor offers it as a homage by the people of his state to the most remarkable Indian of modern times. That it certainly is, but let me end by offering my own homage to the editor. There is one kind of Indian scholar and writer, he (and sometimes she) who writes (and often thinks) in English, and who lives in or at least spends long stretches of the year overseas. There is another kind of Indian scholar, he (and sometime she) who is deeply engaged with the lived experience of the people of the state in which he is based. This kind of writer has a knowledge of the culture and history of his province that is encyclopaedic—he knows, it sometimes seems, not just every sect and every district in his state, but almost every individual and every stone too.

I suppose I fall firmly in the first category, but it has been my privilege (and good luck) to have known and been befriended by several scholars of the second. Among them are the Bengali Gautam Bhadra, the Pahadi Shekhar Pathak, the Tamil A. R. Venkatachalapathy, the Maharashtrian Sadanand More, and, not least, the Oriya Jatin Kumar Nayak. Whenever I meet or listen to one of these men I am simultaneously awed as well as humbled. The first sentiment comes from being exposed to the richness of their understanding and experience; the second from the painful awareness of my own inadequacies in this regard.

These scholars are based in their province, but are by no means provincial. They are often fluent in English and keep abreast of the latest trends or fashions in global scholarship (although they refuse to be blown away by them). Like Gandhi himself, they are rooted cosmopolitans; like him they demonstrate that a love of one’s language or home state is perfectly consistent with an identification with the larger entity called India, and the still larger entity known as the human race.

## **GANDHI’S FAITH, AND OURS**

Many years ago, I had an argument with the philosopher Ramchandra (Ramu) Gandhi about his grandfather’s faith. I had always admired the Mahatma, but my secular-socialist self sought to rid him of the spiritual baggage which seemed unnecessary to his broader message. Could we not follow Gandhi in his empathy for the poor and his insistence on non-violence while rejecting the religious idiom in which these ideas were cloaked? Ramu Gandhi argued that

the attempt to secularize Gandhi was both mistaken and misleading. If you take the Mahatma's faith out of him, he told me, then Gandhi would not be the Mahatma. His religious beliefs were central to his political and social philosophy—in this respect, the man was the message.

Gandhi was born a decade after the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. This was a time of widespread skepticism among the educated classes in England and Europe, a sentiment captured in the title of Thomas Hardy's poem, 'God's Funeral'. But outside the Continent, this was also a time of heightened missionary activity. In their new colonies in Africa and Asia, European priests sought to claim the heathen and the pagan for Christianity. In reaction, Hindus started missionary societies of their own, as in the Arya Samaj, which sought to make Hindus more militant to face the challenge of the Church.

The distinctiveness of Gandhi's faith was that it simultaneously rejected the atheism of the intellectuals as well as the proselytizing of the missionaries. The Vaishnavism of his family was oriented towards mystical devotion rather than sectarian militancy. From his Jain preceptor Raychandbhai he learned the virtues of austerity and non-violence. His upbringing was ecumenical; so, too, was his personal orientation. He had close Muslim friends in school, and even closer Jewish and Parsi friends while working in South Africa. For most of his adult life his best friend was a practising Christian priest, Charles Freer Andrews. If you admired Gandhi—as many Indians did—you called him 'Bapu' or Gandhiji'. If you disliked Gandhi—as many other Indians did—you referred to him as 'Mr Gandhi' or 'M. K. Gandhi'. It is a remarkable (if still little-known) fact that it was only Andrews who called Gandhi by his first name, 'Mohan'.

Despite his lifelong interest in religious pluralism, Gandhi had not the leisure to work out a systematic treatise on the subject. There is no one text we can go to; rather, we have to deduce his theology from things he said or did at different times. From these scattered clues, it appears that Gandhi's faith had five core components.

First, Gandhi rejected the idea that there was one privileged path to God. Second, he believed that all religious traditions were an unstable mixture of truth and error. From these two beliefs followed the third, which was that Gandhi rejected conversion and missionary work. Fourth, Gandhi advocated that a human being should stick to the religion he or she was born into, and seek to improve its 'truth content'. Fifth, Gandhi encouraged inter-religious dialogue, so that individuals could see their faith in the critical reflections of another.

Gandhi once said of his own faith that he had 'broadened my Hinduism by loving other religions as my own'. One of his notable innovations was the inter-faith prayer meeting, where texts of different religions were read and sung to a mixed audience. At an International Fellowship of Religions, held at Sabarmati in January 1928, he said that 'We can only pray, if we are Hindus, not that a Christian should become a Hindu, or if we are Mussalmans, not that a Hindu or a Christian should become a Mussalman, nor should we even secretly pray that anyone should be converted to our faith, but our inmost prayer should be that a Hindu should be a better Hindu, a

Muslim a better Muslim and a Christian a better Christian. That is the fundamental truth of fellowship.’

What does it mean to be a better Hindu, or Muslim, or Christian? The sacred texts of all religions have contradictory trends and impulses; sanctioning one thing, but also its opposite. Gandhi urged that we recover and reaffirm those trends that oppose violence and discrimination while promoting justice and non-violence. The Shankaracharyas claimed that Untouchability was sanctioned by the Shastras; Gandhi answered that in that case the Shastras did not represent the true traditions of Hinduism. Islamic texts might speak of women in condescending or disparaging terms in one place and in terms of reverence and respect in another; surely a Muslim committed to justice would value the second above the first? Likewise, a Christian must privilege the pacifism of Jesus’s life above the passages in the Bible calling for revenge and retribution against people of other faiths.

For most human beings, their views on religion are relevant only to themselves, or at best to their friends and family. But Gandhi was a man in public life, a major political player in a very large and diverse country. How did his faith resonate with other individuals and groups in the India of his day?

There were three groups of Indians that most vocally opposed Gandhi’s religious views. First, there were the secular socialists, who saw Gandhi’s faith as superstition, as a throwback to a backward medieval age. Second, there were the Muslim politicians, who saw his talk of inter-faith dialogue as a cloak and cover for his essentially Hindu interest. Third, there were the radicals of his own religion, who saw Gandhi’s talk of inter-faith dialogue as a denial of the Hindu essence of the Indian nation.

It was a member of this third tendency, Nathuram Godse, who murdered the Mahatma sixty years ago today.

Like the late 19th century, the early 21st century has also seen a renewal of an arrogant atheism on the one side and of religious bigotry on the other. Bookshops are awash with titles proclaiming that God does not exist; the streets are muddied and bloodied by battles and wars between competing fundamentalisms. Twenty-five years after I argued with him, I can see that Ramu Gandhi was even more right than he knew. One cannot, as the philosopher cautioned me, understand the Mahatma without paying proper attention to his religious beliefs and practices. But Gandhi’s faith was and is relevant not merely to himself. It may be of vital assistance in promoting peace and harmony between people who worship different Gods or no God at all. Back in 1919, while seeking to forge an entente cordiale between India’s two major religious groupings, Gandhi asked them to collectively take this vow:

‘With God as witness we Hindus and Mahomedans declare that we shall behave towards one another as children of the same parents, that we shall have no differences, that the sorrows of each will be the sorrows of the other and that each shall help the other in removing them. We

shall respect each other's religion and religious feelings and shall not stand in the way of our respective religious practices. We shall always refrain from violence to each other in the name of religion'.

It only remains for me to add: what Gandhi asked of Hindus and Muslims in India in 1919 should be asked again of them today, asked also of Jews and Arabs in Palestine, of Hindus and Buddhists in Sri Lanka, and of Christians and Muslims in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Africa. (published in the Hindustan Times, 30th January 2008)

### **THE DAY EDWINA DIED**

The Indian public in general, and the Indian press in particular, has shown a keen and perhaps excessive interest in the relationship between Jawaharlal Nehru and Edwina Mountbatten. That they were intimates is not to be doubted—but did the bonds ever move from the merely emotional to the tellingly physical? That one was the Prime Minister of India and the other the wife of the Governor-General of India we know—but was Nehru ever influenced in his policies by the desires and preferences of his friend Edwina?

Despite the column inches devoted to these matters in the press, and the interrogations and speculations on radio and television, we still don't really know. I do not propose here to provide definitive answers to those questions. But I do wish to supply an interesting and possibly telling sidelight on the Nehru-Edwina friendship. The material comes from the diaries of Walter Crocker, who served two long terms as High Commissioner of Australia in New Delhi, and later published an incisive political biography of Nehru.

On the 21st of February 1960, Edwina Mountbatten died in her sleep while on a visit to Borneo. Shortly after midday, the news was communicated to Walter Crocker by his friend Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, the veteran Gandhian and high-ranking Minister in the Union Government. That evening the Australian diplomat was due to attend a dinner at Hyderabad House in honour of the historian Arnold Toynbee. Toynbee had already published several volumes of his best-selling survey of the rise and fall of civilizations. He was in Delhi at the invitation of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, who had asked him to deliver the first of what was to become an annual lecture in memory of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.

As Crocker wrote in his diary that night, by the time he reached Hyderabad House,

'Nehru was there. He must have had strong feelings about the utterly sudden death of Lady Mountbatten but he showed no sign of it. He sat next to Toynbee at dinner and for a while was silent, but for the rest of the meal was plunged into a lively conversation with him. As usual everyone around looked by comparison, strained, inhibited, dim. There was not a hint of self-consciousness or fear or hesitation about him. His physical handsomeness in itself was

dominating—the eyes, the golden-light brown and healthy skin, the healthy hair... What a man, whatever his policies’.

As a first-hand account of how Jawaharlal Nehru felt and acted the day Edwina Mountbatten died, this is striking indeed. With an almost magisterial self-will, Nehru appears to have kept his thoughts (and we may presume, his grief) hidden within himself. A honoured guest had come to town, and the Prime Minister’s duty was to entertain and amuse him. At the time, Toynbee had a colossal popular following. Never since (and rarely before) has a mere historian been treated with such deference around the globe or so readily acknowledged as an oracle. That evening at Hyderabad House, the others around the table, whether Indian or Western, were inhibited, even tongue-tied. It was only the Prime Minister who could engage Toynbee in a conversation of intellectual equals. His dearest friend had just died: but his office, and his country, demanded of Nehru that he set aside his personal grief and act as was expected of him.

There is some talk that Nehru mortgaged Indian interests in Kashmir at the behest of his English friend (and possibly lover). Such speculation has not yet been backed by concrete evidence. On the other hand, reading Crocker’s account of his conduct in public on 21st September 1960, it is hard to believe that while Edwina was alive, Nehru would have abandoned principle and patriotism in deference to her whims and charms.

We now know, courtesy the unpublished diaries of an Australian diplomat, how Nehru behaved the day Edwina died. How Edwina might have behaved had her dearest friend predeceased her can never be known. Let me supply, as a wholly inadequate substitute, the reactions of the aforementioned diarist. In May 1964 Walter Crocker was serving as Australian Ambassador to the Netherlands. On the morning of the 27th, he got a call telling him that Nehru had passed away in New Delhi. Late that night he made the following entry in his diary:

‘Not much else in my mind for the rest of the day.

My Indian friends and associates, who meant so much to me for the last 12 years, are struck down, one by one. Last week it was [the diplomat] Harish[war] Dayal. Not long before that it was [the civil servant] Sir V. T. [Krishnamachari] and then [the historian K. M.] Panikkar. And a couple of months ago it was [Rajkumari] Amrit [Kaur]. Now the beacon light itself has gone out’.

It only remains for me to repeat the (well deserved) accolades—what a man (whatever his policies), the beacon light itself.

The Hindu 30/09/2007



## OPEN SEASON ON GANDHI AND NEHRU

We Indians are very insecure about our heroes. A scholar who retold, without endorsing them, some old stories about Shivaji's parentage found his book banned and burnt. A writer who made some disparaging remarks about Rabindranath Tagore was censured by the West Bengal Assembly. Another writer was roughed up after he wrote a (admittedly nasty) book about B. R. Ambedkar. And I am myself still coping with a barrage of hate mail that followed a piece I wrote six months ago on the R. S. S. leader M. S. Golwalkar, which merely reproduced his own (admittedly nasty) remarks about Muslims and other minorities.

In 2007, we imagine our heroes to be flawless. I wonder if this was always so. Yudhishtira and Rama were both capable of deceit and deviant behaviour—and our ancestors were happy to be told so. Now, a Dalit will not abide the mildest criticism of Ambedkar, a Maharashtrian will demand total reverence for Shivaji, a Bengali ask that you share his wide-eyed worship for Subhas Chandra Bose and, more recently, Saurav Ganguly. These prejudices are usually manifest at local or sectarian levels, but sometimes they inform the policies of the mighty Government of India too.

Thus, when the BJP was in power, a historian who had written critically about Savarkar would be blacklisted from academic appointments in the gift of the state. The pattern is reproduced under the present Congress regime—except that to be blacklisted now you need to have written critically about Indira Gandhi.

Speaking as a writer, I find that there are only two Indians one can write honestly about without fear of retribution—Mohandas K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. God knows there is plenty to criticize in both cases. Gandhi was a bad father—as recent biographies of his sons Harilal and Manilal testify. Some would say that he was a worse husband. And he was a stern mentor, forcing his disciples to follow his own quirky ideas with regard to clothing, diet, and sexuality.

The list could go on—and it must. Gandhi was manipulative in his dealings with the Congress, disregarding democratic procedure, most famously in his unseating of Subhas Chandra Bose from the party's presidency in 1939. He made major political mistakes—as in the Khilafat movement, which gave a boost to the mullahs, and in the Quit India movement, which quite possibly made Partition inevitable.

Nehru's flaws were also substantial as well as consequential. He treated his wife even worse than Gandhi. He was a mostly absent father. To his colleagues in the national movement he could appear distant and aristocratic. But this snobbishness had political costs too. As a Brahmin and an anglicized Socialist, Nehru distrusted businessmen as a class and the United States of America as a country. These personal prejudices led, on the one hand, to a stifling of the Indian economy, and, on the other, to an unfortunate cooling of relations between the two great multi-ethnic democracies on earth.

Turn, next, to his political errors and misjudgements. Had Nehru not so arrogantly rejected the Muslim League's proposal to enter into a coalition government with the Congress in the United Provinces after the 1937 elections, the two parties might have found a way to keep India united when the British left. After Independence, the country was made to pay dearly for Nehru's under-estimation of the military strength of the Chinese and his corresponding overestimation of the administrative abilities of V. K. Krishna Menon.

I have couched these criticisms in neutral, academic, language, but one more usually hears them expressed in more colourful terms. For example, Ambedkarites see Gandhi as an 'enemy' of the Dalits, whereas for a Hindutva ideologue he should be considered the 'father of Pakistan'. The abuse heaped on Nehru by free-marketeers on the one hand and by Lohia-ite leftists on the other is also very pungent, and in the conventional sense of the term (a sense now rendered redundant) wholly un-Parliamentary.

Indians, whether lay or academic, left-wing or right-wing, men, women or children, feel free to criticize Gandhi and Nehru wherever they wish to and in whatever words that come naturally to them. Why do we not then have the license to say what we want about other major figures in our modern history? Why this taboo on criticizing, on the basis of solid historical evidence, Bose in Bengal, Savarkar in front of radical Hindus, Ambedkar in a Dalit meeting, or Indira Gandhi in the vicinity of 10, Janpath?

One reason we are free to dump on Gandhi and Nehru is that neither is, was, or ever will be a sectarian leader. Despite the best efforts of the Muslim League, many Muslims, among them such devout ones as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, stayed with Gandhi. Despite the criticisms of Ambedkar and company, many Dalits saw Gandhi as being on their side. The portrayal of Gandhi as either a 'Hindu' leader or an 'upper caste' leader was made with great determination, but with limited success. No one even tried to represent him as a 'Gujarati', since his identification with the other parts and provinces of India was as deep and sincere as with his own.

Likewise with Jawaharlal Nehru. As Rajmohan Gandhi has pointed out, the main reason the Mahatma chose Nehru as his heir—above Patel, Rajagopalachari, Azad, Kripalani, or Prasad—was that his personality and political beliefs transcended the divides of religion, region, gender, and language. No one thought of Nehru as a man of the Doab, or as a Hindu, or as a male chauvinist. He was greatly admired by South Indians, by Muslims and Christians, and by women, large sections of whom saw him as working for and on behalf of their own best interests.

Ironically, and tragically, it is the fact that they so effectively transcended sectarian boundaries while they lived, that makes Gandhi and Nehru so vulnerable to criticism and abuse now. For Indian politics is increasingly defined by interest groups based on the identities of religion, region and caste. Each group has a vested interest in protecting and promoting their own leaders, leaders who may be living or long-dead. Thus Dalits in Uttar Pradesh will not abide any attacks

on Mayawati or Ambedkar, and Shiv Sainiks in Maharashtra feel compelled to respond, violently if necessary, to public criticisms of Bal Thackeray or Shivaji.

Notably, each group is unwilling to share his or her leader with others. Sometimes this is to be welcomed—who but a bigot would want to follow bigot anyway? At other times this possessiveness has led to a serious diminution of the stature of the leader concerned. It is something of a pity that Vallabhbhai Patel has now been reduced or redefined to being a Gujarati, Tagore to a Bengali, and Ambedkar to a Dalit.

And so, of all our icons and heroes dead or alive, the two whom we can most fearlessly criticize are the two who did most to build a free and democratic India. This, to be sure, is a land of paradox and contradiction, but of all the paradoxes and contradictions abroad this one must surely count as the most bizarre. That we can treat Gandhi and Nehru as we do testifies to their greatness, and perhaps also to our own meanness.

(published in the Hindustan Times, 24th July 2007)

### **THE LAST QUAKER IN INDIA**

On London's busy Euston Road, opposite the even busier Euston Station, stands a stone building supported by two large pillars. This is Friends House, the headquarters of the Society of Friends, who are also known as the Quakers. Now, in 2007, the entry to the premises is through the garden at the side; but when Mahatma Gandhi visited it in 1931 he must surely have come in through the big wooden doors in front.

In the cumulative index to the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi there are ten references under the entry 'Quakers'. To properly appreciate the importance of the Society in Gandhi's life, however, these must be supplemented by the references to individual Quakers: for example, the 88 to Horace Alexander, the 198 to Agatha Harrison, the 102 to Muriel Lester, the 43 to Reginald Reynolds, and the 42 to S. E. Stokes.

These five Quakers all played a sterling role in advancing the Gandhian cause. Agatha Harrison and Muriel Lester were based in London, where they ran the very active Friends of India Society, mobilizing British public opinion in favour of the freedom of India. Horace Alexander and Reginald Reynolds were wandering nomads, travelling from England to India, where they played crucial mediatory roles between Gandhi and the officials of the Raj. Samuel (later Satyanand) Stokes was based wholly in India, in the hills of Himachal, where he ran schools, fought against forced labour, planted apples, and went to jail during the non-co-operation movement.

In fact, the Quaker connection to this country long predates Gandhi. As related by Marjorie Sykes in her book *An Indian Tapestry*, the first Quaker came to India in 1657, soon after the Society was formed. Through the centuries Quakers have lived in India, sometimes as servants of

the Company and the Raj, at other times as servants of the people. Sykes's book documents (as the sub-title says), 'Quaker threads in the history of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, from the seventeenth century to Independence'. We learn here of the work done by Quakers in running schools, colleges, hospitals, libraries, children's clubs, and farms.

Characteristically, we learn little about the author himself. Marjorie Sykes herself spent sixty years in India, living, labouring, loving. She knew Gandhi (meriting four references in the Collected Works!) and, much better, Rabindranath Tagore. She worked for long periods in Santiniketan, where she taught, translated some of Tagore's plays, and co-authored a major biography of Gandhi's and Tagore's friend Charles Freer Andrews. Later, she ran a girls' school in the Niligiri hills. In between her stints in east and south she spent time in the Narmada valley, based in the Quaker settlement at Rasulia (which was established as long ago as 1891). Here she promoted sustainable agriculture (among other things, her Centre published the Indian edition of Fukuoka's classic *One Straw Revolution*) and vigorously opposed the attempts to drown the valley in a series of large dams.

Marjorie Sykes's history ends with Independence. It thus does not take into account her own work in the Narmada valley, or the work, down in Kerala, of the architect Laurie Baker. Baker, who died on the first day of April, aged ninety, was a pioneer of low-cost and eco-friendly architecture. As his biographer Gautam Bhatia writes, although 'Baker's work appears to emanate from the functional doctrines of the modernist movement, it is largely the outcome of his Quaker past'. In his life and work was manifest this 'rigorous Quaker upbringing, with its emphasis on simplicity and austerity, its rejection of all ornament and luxury as sinful self-indulgence...'.

Baker is best known for the thousands of buildings he built in Kerala, among them houses, anganwadis, churches, and at least one fishing village. He also designed the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, where (owing to the artfulness of Baker's designs) the costs were actually much less than budgeted—allowing the Centre to build a world-class library with the money saved. Before he moved to Kerala, Baker had lived in the Kumaon hills, where he helped his doctor-wife run a hospital for the hill villagers.

When Baker first came out to India in 1945, he met Mahatma Gandhi, in a chance encounter which (to quote his biographer) 'seems to have made a great impact on his architecture, as Gandhi's ideologies were to influence him in all his life'. It was surely the Gandhian in him that moved him to write what was the first critical article to appear after the atomic tests of May 1998. Immediately after the tests, the commentary in the newspapers was uniformly eulogistic. Politicians strutted about in Parliament, and scientists posed for photographs dressed in military attire. The first note of dissent was struck by Baker. In a brilliant brief article, he pointed out that the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, had asked of Indian scientists that their work be non-violent, that it be environmentally benign, and that it enhance the welfare and happiness of the poor.

The atom bomb, Indian or otherwise, fails these three tests of a Gandhian science. By those same criteria, the science practiced by the last Quaker in India comes out with flying colours.

### **SCOTTISH INTERNATIONALIST**

‘India lives in her villages’, said Mahatma Gandhi. This is an injunction that the environmental movement in India has taken very seriously indeed. Thus scholars and activists have argued about such matters as the commercial bias in forest policy, the disappearance of species, the drying up of village tanks, and the displacement of adivasis by large dams.

These are all important issues, deserving careful attention and concerted action. Still, it is striking how the environmental problems of the cities have received scant attention in comparison. For India lives in her cities and towns, too, in cities and towns plagued by hazardous work conditions, insanitary living conditions, high rates of air and water pollution, and the like.

In addressing these problems today, we can seek inspiration in the work of a remarkable urban environmentalist of the past. His name was Patrick Geddes, and he was born in 1854, in Scotland. After making a considerable reputation as a town planner in Europe, he came to India in 1914, at the age of sixty. For the next eight years Geddes was based in the sub-continent, studying and writing about the culture and ecology of the Indian city.

Geddes wrote nearly fifty town plans in India, some no more than four or five pages long, others printed in more than one bulky volume. Running through these plans are three central themes. The first I shall term ‘Respect for Nature’. His approach to town planning was deeply ecological, emphasizing a city’s relationship to its water sources, the promotion of parks and trees, the importance of recycling, and the lessening of dependence on the resources of the hinterland. Particularly noteworthy is what he says about wells. These, he says, should ‘be regarded as a valuable reserve to the existing water supplies, even if these be efficient.’ As he continues, ‘any and every water system occasionally goes out of order, and is open to accidents and injuries of very many kinds; and in these old wells we inherit an ancient policy, of life insurance, of a very real kind, and one far too valuable to be abandoned’. Geddes was writing here about Thane, but his words might be pasted above the office desks of planners working today in Chennai, Hyderabad, and a dozen other cities of India.

The second of Geddes’s themes is what I call ‘Respect for Democracy’. He insisted that the residents of a city must help design plans made for them. His own plans paid special attention to the needs of such disadvantaged groups as women, children, and low castes. And he was implacably opposed to ‘sweeping clearances and vigorous demolitions [that] seem [to be] coming fully in fashion...’. In the Changan Mohalla of Lahore, he was appalled by a scheme for re-development which planned to destroy five Mosques, two Dharamsalas, tombs and temples, and shops and dwellings. It spared only one building: the Police Station.

Geddes condemned this scheme as an ‘indiscriminate destruction of the whole past labour and industry of men, of all buildings good, bad and indifferent, and with these, of all their human values and associations, profane and sacred, Police Office only excepted!’ His ground rule for clearance and eviction was that ‘these must in any and every case be deprecated until and unless new and adequate location is provided’—words that, in a just world, would guide the actions not only of the town planner, but of the dam engineer and missile builder as well.

The third of Geddes’s core ideas may be termed the ‘Respect for Tradition’. After a visit to Nadiad, in Gujarat, he said the town planner must have an ‘appreciation of all that is best in the old domestic architecture of Indian cities and of renewing this where it has fallen away’. It was absurd to destroy, as being ‘out of date, fine old carven housefronts, which Western museums would treasure and Western artists be proud to emulate’. He once offered a five-word motto which those interested in Heritage Preservation might adopt as their own, namely: ‘To Postpone is to Conserve’.

Patrick Geddes was that oxymoron, a Scottish internationalist. He worked for many years in his native land, but also had a notable influence on the Continent. He helped plan a university in Palestine, and did some of his best work in India. To press for the continuing relevance of that work I can do no worse than quote Geddes’s great American disciple, Lewis Mumford. Writing some two decades after his mentor’s death, Mumford remarked that

‘What Geddes’s outlook and method contribute to the planning of today, are precisely the elements that the administrator and bureaucrat, in the interests of economy or efficiency, are tempted to leave out: time, patience, loving care of detail, a watchful inter-relation of past and future, an insistence upon the human scale and the human purpose [above] merely mechanical requirements: finally a willingness to leave an essential part of the process to those who are most intimately concerned with it: the ultimate consumers or citizens.’

### **GENTLE DENTS IN A WORTHY IDOL**

I think it is fair to say that of all Indian industrialists past and present, J. R. D. Tata has been the most widely admired. Part of the reason had to do with his business acumen, his skill in taking the Tatas beyond their core competence in steel and heavy engineering into hotels and computers. But then there have been other entrepreneurs who have been as effective in expanding their empires and moving into new areas of profit-making business. What distinguished JRD from these other men was his commitment to professional excellence and to ethical practice. To add to that, he was a notable philanthropist, who helped fund high-quality institutes of scientific research, student scholarship schemes, theatre and art programmes, rural development schemes, and much else. And, as if all this was not enough, there was his own larger-than-life personality, as manifest in his elegant foreign wife, his friendships with the good and great of at least three continents, and his near-legendary achievements as an aviator.

J. R. D. Tata's reputation is well founded, but some items that came my way recently perhaps dent it just a little. While doing research on Indira Gandhi's Emergency, I found a report by a senior New York Times journalist on those years spent by us Indians under that lady's dictatorship. This reporter, J. Anthony Lukacs, found that the Emergency was widely hailed by the middle-class, who compared it favourably with the strife-torn decade that had preceded it: years that saw the Naxalite upsurge, the great railway strike, the Bihar and Gujarat movements, and Jayaprakash Narayan's all-India campaign of civil disobedience. But now that strikes and dharnas had been outlawed, the crime rate had come down and the trains ran on time. A good monsoon in 1975 meant that prices also fell. Lukacs was told by an official in Delhi that it was only foreigners who cared for such things as the freedom of expression. 'We are tired of being the workshop of failed democracy', said the official: 'The time has come to exchange some of our vaunted individual rights for some economic development'.

Lukacs discovered that, aside from the middle class, the business community were also pleased with the Emergency. A Delhi hotel owner told him that life now was 'just wonderful. We used to have terrible problems with the unions. Now when they give us any troubles, the Government just put them in jail.' In Bombay, the journalist met J. R. D. Tata, who told him that 'things had gone too far. You can't imagine what we've been through here—strikes, boycotts, demonstrations. Why, there were days I couldn't walk out of my office into the street. The parliamentary system is not suited to our needs'.

In January 1977 the Emergency was lifted. Fresh elections were held in March, which saw Indira Gandhi and her Congress party being removed from office. However, in January 1980 Mrs Gandhi commenced a fresh term as Prime Minister, sent there with a fresh mandate from the people. India had returned emphatically to democracy, to voting and freedom of expression, but also to popular expressions of grievances large and small, real as well as imagined. For these were also the years of the renewal of the Jharkhand movement, the radicalization of the Punjab movement, and the birth of the Assam movement. To these assertions of ethnic identity were added protests based on more orthodox class lines, as in the massive textile strike in Bombay in 1982.

The next year, 1983, J. R. D. Tata was honoured with a reception hosted by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Bombay. This, in part, is what he said:

'The Bombay of my youth with its magnificent harbour, its shady wooded hills, its flowering trees, its then disciplined population—there were no morchas then to impede one's travels through the city—its virtual absence of beggars, its freedom from law and order problems, and how happy a place it was in which to live and to work, a city of which we could be proud'.

The Bombay of JRD's youth was, of course, the Bombay of the British Raj. In that colonial autocracy, as in its post-colonial successor of 1975-7, the state looked with deep displeasure on morchas and the like. The key phrase in the lines I have just quoted is, I think, 'its then

disciplined population'. Here, as in that other remark made and recorded during the Emergency, JRD appeared to be saying: 'The parliamentary system is not suited to our needs'.

As is well known, one of JRD's abiding passions was population control. Along with many others of his class and generation, he believed that one reason India was not progressing quickly enough was that there were far too many Indians. He wrote often to the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, about this, wrote with a certain impatience too, making clear his view that the Government was not adequately committed to promoting contraception among the poor. The impatience, one has to say, was not only with Nehru or his Government, but also with the cumbersome procedures of democratic practice, with the need to obtain so many approvals before action could be taken—approval from budget committees, from the Cabinet, from the Parliament, and, not least, from the Indian people themselves.

Viewed sympathetically, JRD's attitude towards democracy might be understood as a product of the despair of old age. All his life this great man had sought to build a great industrial house and, by that means, a great country. His dreams for the Tatas had been perhaps three-quarters fulfilled; the remainder falling victim to the stranglehold of the state on the economy. His dreams for India were however only half-fulfilled (at best); the remainder falling victim to the corruptions of politicians and the corrosions of competing interest groups. As death approached, this unselfish man had no regrets as to the life he had himself lived. But the thought crossed his mind, and crossed it again—would his fellow Indians perhaps have been better off under a benign and corruption-free dictatorship?

Viewed sociologically, JRD's views seem of a piece with the wider impatience with democracy and democratic procedures displayed by industrialists everywhere. Milton Friedman, and Friedrich Hayek before him, floated the fantastic theory that those who believe in a free market necessarily believe in freedom of political choice. I say 'fantastic' because this theory has been violated by countless dictators from Antonio Salazar to Augusto Pinochet, the violations encouraged, at every step, by factory owners seeking to safeguard the operations of their factories from prying reporters or self-organized workers. The Hayek-Friedman thesis is also decisively repudiated by the governments of their own countries, the United Kingdom and the United States. These have always found dictators easier to deal with, and especially to sign arms and other contracts with. Here, too, the denial of democracy has been silently—and sometimes not so silently—hailed by the capitalist class.

J. R. D. Tata, of course, was not the common or garden variety of capitalist. The type typecast in the preceding paragraph was (and is) motivated by profits and by profits alone. On the other hand, JRD was a man of a larger and more humane vision. He wished all Indians to share in the fruits of economic growth. This end he served by building world-class industries under the Tata label, and by donating vast chunks of his personal wealth to charity. However, there was only so much one man and one House could do. But what if India was run as a well-managed company, with a brilliant and disinterested man (or woman) as its CEO? Might not poverty be removed



much faster? Such appear to have been J. R. D. Tata's political views. The best, or at least the most polite, word I can summon to describe them is: 'naïve'.

## RECORDING GANDHI

Some months ago, I wrote in these columns about Nirmal Kumar Bose, the anthropologist who worked with Mahatma Gandhi and also wrote about him. That piece attracted the attention of a resident of Bangalore named Biren Das, whom I knew of as a patron of classical music and as the great-grandson of the inventor of the roshogoola. What I did not know was that Mr Das was also a family friend of N. K. Bose. On reading my column, he gifted me a CD with two rare recordings of Bose speaking about Gandhi, in the American town of Madison in 1958. Listening to the CD has provided me more illumination than many of the books about Gandhi that I have read.

'Despite the greatness with which we clothe him', remarks Bose, 'Gandhi was intensely human'. His own talks succeed splendidly in humanizing Gandhi, with personal recollection skilfully mixed with analytical judgements on the Mahatma's thought and practice. Bose gave up a great deal to join Gandhi—his career, a family life—but he would not give up his scholarly detachment or sense of humour, both of which are on display here. (It is striking, for instance, that he never uses the appellation 'Mahatma', speaking throughout of 'Gandhi'.)

The anthropologist begins by recalling his first acquaintance with Gandhi, which was through his writings. As a student at Calcutta University, he subscribed to the journal *Young India*, where the Mahatma put forward his views on politics and social reform, and invited arguments and disagreements.

Bose started reading Gandhi in the early 1920s. However, they met only in 1934, when the Mahatma was touring rural Bengal. There is a vivid description here of that first meeting. 'The only slavery Gandhi admitted to', says Bose, 'was that of time'. Invited to join Gandhi on his morning walk, the anthropologist had as his companion the great Pathan exponent of non-violence, Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Bose was at least six inches taller than the Mahatma, and Ghaffar Khan a further foot taller still. Yet, as he recalls, the two were hard put to keep pace with Gandhi. They, could, however, gather their breath when Gandhi stopped to collect stones which would later be used to build a road to the ashram where he was staying.

Bose's most intense engagement with Gandhi was when he walked with him through Noakhali in 1946-7. As recollected here, the Mahatma asked him to become his secretary and interpreter on the grounds that of all his Bengali associates Bose had the job that was most dispensable. Gandhi could scarcely ask a social worker or medical doctor to abandon what he was doing, while the work of a university lecturer was, in comparison, less than essential.

While on the road, Bose and Gandhi had many interesting arguments. When the anthropologist said he did not believe in God, Gandhi asked what he did believe in. The pursuit of truth, he answered. (That was a faith the Mahatma was prepared to accept, and one he followed himself, except that he usually dignified it with a capital letter, as Truth.)

As Bose recalls, Gandhi's message to Bengal after the riots was that 'it was not consolation that will save us, but courage'. There is a moving account of Gandhi's work in restoring communal peace in Calcutta during August/September 1947. Several times during his talk Bose says: 'I bore witness to that'. He did, indeed. For Bose was with Gandhi during what might have been the most heroic months of a very heroic life. With his skill as a scholar and writer—and, as this tape show, speaker—he recorded them, with great sensitivity and insight, for the benefit of posterity.

Bose also speaks about Mahatma Gandhi's attitude towards India's colonial rulers. The nationalist movement, insisted Gandhi, was against British rule, but not against Britain, and certainly not against Englishmen. Nor, he believed, should India win its freedom merely in order to oppress and exploit other countries in turn. Reflecting on the meaning and efficacy of non violence, Bose asks a question whose answer is perhaps contained in the manner of its posing: 'Does a person have the right to kill another human being simply on account of a difference of opinion?'

On the evidence of these talks Bose must have been a most impressive speaker, with a voice that was clear, powerful, and resonant. The talks were originally recorded on tape, and later transferred to a Compact Disc. When I opened the CD on a computer, the screen announced that this was an 'Unknown Album', featuring the work of an 'Unknown Artist'. That is how the Windows programme would, I suppose, designate any disc that is not pre-recorded or which it does not recognize. It is for the listener to supply the facts that the 'artist' was once well known as an anthropologist and writer, and that the 'unknown' album contains a priceless eyewitness account of the life and work of the greatest Indian of modern times.

### **BISMILLAH OF BANARAS**

In a delicious paradox that can only be Indian, the man who best embodied the spirit of the holy Hindu city of Banaras was a Muslim. Although he was born in Bihar, Bismillah Khan moved to Banaras as a young man, and lived there until he died, spending some seven decades in an old, crumbling haveli, surrounded by his shehnais, a large extended family, and an even larger circle of hangers-on.

Bismillah came from a family of musicians who had traditionally been employed by the Kashi Viswanath Mandir in Banaras. His own identification with the city went beyond that. He went here and there to perform, but always returned to the soil, the air, and the water that nourished

him and his craft. As he liked to say, he was a worshipper of both Allah and Saraswati. Once, a rich American university invited Bismillah to be their musician-in-residence, and asked him to state his terms. Negotiations were abruptly concluded when the musician replied that he would only come if he could bring his beloved Ganga with him.

That a Muslim musician personified Kashi so stuck in the gullets of Hindu bigots. Not that the orthodox Muslims had much time for Bismillah either. In the wonderful documentary that Nasreen Munni Kabir made of him—whose title I have stolen for this column—Bismillah explains how for some mullahs, music is the work of the Devil, ‘haram’. ‘Harrraaam’, he repeats, and then cackles delightedly. Then there was the little ear-ring Bismillah wore, this in violation of some versions of Islam yet a mark of the catholicism of his own, uniquely inclusive, spiritual tradition.

I personally owe Bismillah Khan a great deal, owe him my interest in classical music in fact. As a schoolboy I listened to film music and Western pop music, and nothing else. Awake one night owing to an attack of asthma, I was fiddling with the radio when I chanced upon the music of the shehnai. I listened, at first with boredom, and then with an increasing enchantment. Within minutes I could tell that this was altogether superior to the stuff I used to hear on the BBC’s ‘Top Twenty’ or Radio Ceylon’s ‘Binaca Geet Mala’. As the bronchodilators took effect and my breath eased, I immersed myself in the music. When it ended half-an-hour later, the announcer informed us that we had just heard Raga Durga, played on the shehnai by Ustad Bismillah Khan.

So, that was my first experience of Bismillah—listening to him between 2.30 and 3 a.m. on the General Overseas Service of All India Radio. I graduated to listening to him in the more conventional way—by going to evening concerts where he played. In the five years I spent in Delhi University I must have heard him play on at least four occasions. The one I remember best was at the Kamani Auditorium, where he played before the interval and M. S. Subbulakshmi sang afterwards, a true ‘dream team’, indeed, of two great musicians who were also great human beings—one man, one woman, one Hindu, the other Muslim, one North Indian, the other South Indian, and both born in the same year, 1916.

Twenty-five years after I first heard Bismillah, I was able to repay—in small measure—a debt that had by then accumulated beyond all repayment. A friend who was a high official asked me to write a piece for the press urging that M. S. Subbulakshmi and Lata Mangeshkar be awarded the Bharat Ratna. I accepted the commission, since I likewise believed that it was past time that India’s highest honour was rescued from the politicians, and returned to the artists and scholars for whom it was originally intended. However, when I wrote the article I strayed somewhat from my friend’s script, and added the names of Ravi Shankar and Bismillah Khan to the ones he had given me. All four, I am happy to say, were awarded the Bharat Ratna in due course.

Like so many other readers of this column, my life has been lived to the music of Bismillah Khan. We all have our memories of where and when we first heard him play. And we all have our own favourite compositions. The Bismillah melodies that I especially love are his Durga, naturally, but also his Shankara and his Kedar, and his Chaiti and his Pahadi dhun.

On Bismillah's death the Government of his home state, Uttar Pradesh, announced that it would set up an Academy to honour its memory. As it happened, a better and more enduring memorial to Bismillah had already been set in motion. I refer, of course, to the magnificent response of the citizens of Banaras to the bomb blasts that rocked their city earlier this year. Intended to set Hindu against Muslim, the blasts instead reinforced the ties that bind the two communities in this irreducibly composite city. In affirming their trans-religious solidarity, the residents of Banaras took heart from the example of their greatest fellow townsman, who had himself refused to celebrate his birthday in protest against the terrorists. For the spirit of Bismillah is the spirit of Banaras, and, the rest of us willing, the spirit of India too.

### **GALBRAITH THE GREEN**

John Kenneth Galbraith, who died recently, was an economist of capacious interests and controversial views. His many works of scholarship were widely read, acclaimed by some and dismissed by others. I am not an economist, and thus not in a position to judge the merits of Galbraith's writings on the modern corporation or the free market. What I wish to do instead is to focus on Galbraith's forgotten contribution to the environmental debate.

This took the shape of a single essay, published in 1958, the same year that appeared the economist's *The Affluent Society*, a book that wryly anatomized the social consequences of the mass consumption age. In his book, Galbraith highlighted the 'preoccupation with productivity and production' in postwar America and Western Europe. The population in these societies had for the most part been adequately housed, clothed, and fed; now they expressed a desire for 'more elegant cars, more exotic food, more erotic clothing, more elaborate entertainment'.

The essay I speak of was written months after the book which made Galbraith's name and reputation. 'How Much Should a Country Consume?' is its provocative title, and it can be read as a reflective footnote to *The Affluent Society*. In the book itself, Galbraith had noted the disjunction between 'private affluence and public squalor', of how the single-minded pursuit of wealth had diverted attention and resources from the nurturing of true democracy, which he defined as the provision of public infrastructure, the creation of decent schools, parks, and hospitals. Now the economist turned his attention to the long-term consequences of this collective promotion of consumption, of the 'gargantuan and growing appetite' for resources in contemporary America. The American conservation movement, he remarked, had certainly noted the massive exploitation of resources and materials in the postwar period. However, its response

was to look for more efficient methods of extraction, or the substitution of one material for another through technological innovation.

There was, wrote Galbraith, a noticeable 'selectivity in the conservationist's approach to materials consumption.' For 'if we are concerned about our great appetite for materials, it is plausible to seek to increase the supply, or decrease waste, to make better use of the stocks that are available, and to develop substitutes. But what of the appetite itself? Surely this is the ultimate source of the problem. If it continues its geometric course, will it not one day have to be restrained? Yet in the literature of the resource problem this is the forbidden question. Over it hangs a nearly total silence. It is as though, in the discussion of the chance for avoiding automobile accidents, we agree not to make any mention of speed!'

Galbraith identified two major reasons for the silence with regard to consumption. One was ideological, the worship of the Great God Growth. The principle of growth was a cardinal belief of the American people; this necessarily implied a continuous increase in the production of consumer goods. The second reason was political, the widespread scepticism of the state. For the America of the 1950s had witnessed the 'resurgence of a notably over-simplified view of economic life which [ascribed] a magical automatism to the price system...'. Now Galbraith was himself an unreconstructed New Dealer, who would tackle the problem of over-consumption as he would tackle the problem of under-employment, that is, through purposive state intervention. At the time he wrote, however, free-market economics ruled, and 'since consumption could not be discussed without raising the question of an increased role for the state, it was not discussed'.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the appetites of consumers in the Western world (and of the United States in particular) placed a serious stress on the global environment. The pillage of forests, the strip-mining of land, the pollution of water and air, and the disturbances in world climate—these all were the consequence of the environmentally insensitive growth policies followed by the developed world.

In the present century, the threats to the global environment will be posed mainly by the developing world, in particular by the economic aspirations of those emerging giants, India and China. It is thus that the question posed by Galbraith, 'How Much Should a Country Consume?', may yet turn out to be the fundamental question of the 21st century. For the jury is out on whether the earth can sustain the globalization of the American way of life. There are real concerns that the competitive greed of the industrialized nations (India and China included) shall lead to ecological devastation and to costly wars between nations, these fought for control over natural resources.

Galbraith's essay of 1958 is so obscure that it might even have been forgotten by its prolific author. And it appears to have escaped the attention of his hardworking biographer, Richard Parker, whose massive 700 page tome, *John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics*, shows no awareness of this particular work of his subject. Yet it was strikingly

prescient, as this final quote from the essay reveals: ‘It remains a canon of modern diplomacy that any preoccupation with oil should be concealed by calling on our still ample reserves of sanctimony’.

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### **AMARTYA SEN FOR PRESIDENT**

In a little over a year’s time, the term of the current President of India will come to an end. Good man though he is, Abdul Kalam is unlikely to get a second term, a privilege thus far accorded only to the first holder of the office, Rajendra Prasad. Who will succeed him? In political circles in Delhi, various names are doing the rounds. Four I have heard being mentioned are those of Dr Karan Singh, Arjun Singh, Shivraj Patil, and Sushil Kumar Shinde. Of this quartet, perhaps Mr Arjun Singh and Mr Patil have the greatest length of service and depth of devotion to the party’s First Family. But the other two are devoted enough, and have other attributes to boot. Dr Karan Singh is polished in person, dress, and speech, while Mr Shinde is a Dalit from the politically influential state of Maharashtra.

Whoever is finally chosen, the bazaar gossip has it that the next President will be an old Congressman, currently unemployed or under-employed. Let me now complicate the picture by throwing a new name into the ring—that of a non-party (although not non-political) economist born in Bengal but currently resident in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I can think of at least five reasons why Amartya Sen would be the best next President of India.

The first reason is that he would bring to this post a gravitas that it has not had for some forty years. The first two Presidents were men of real distinction. Rajendra Prasad was one of the great figures of the nationalist movement, and President of the Constituent Assembly before he became President of the Republic. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was a world-renowned philosopher, who held a prestigious chair at Oxford, served as Vice Chancellor of the Andhra and Banaras Hindu Universities, and wrote some very influential works of popular scholarship. Although some honourable men have been President since—I think especially of the current holder of the office and of K. R. Narayanan—none have matched Rajen babu or Dr Radhakrishnan for sheer, solid achievement. And that Amartya Sen will certainly do.

The second reason is that it would be good for India’s image abroad. In an increasingly interconnected and globalized universe, Amartya Sen is superbly qualified to interpret us to the world, as well as the world to us. In this respect, and endeavour, he would be following in the footsteps of the second President of India. When Dr Radhakrishnan spoke, people of all races sat up and listened. Sen’s audiences would be more captive (and captivated)—for one thing because he has a wider range of interests, for another because he carries that uniquely effective stamp, that bestowed by the Nobel Prize.

Like Dr Radhakrishnan, Amartya Sen is one of nature's gentlemen. He is polite to his friends and politer to his enemies—if he has any. Radhakrishnan was both a knight of the realm and the editor of a reverential book about that great enemy of empire, Mahatma Gandhi. Sen counts among his friends both the committed globalizer Dr Manmohan Singh and the fervent anti-globalizer Arundhati Roy. He has often been photographed with one or the other (not yet with both, although that moment may still come). That he is so courteous and proper must only be a point in his favour, at least when we are speaking of the chances of his becoming President. We may be sure that as Head of State, Sen will not put a foot wrong or speak a word out of place.

The third reason why Sen should become President is that he would be the perfect bridge between the two most important forces currently in Indian politics—the Congress party and the parliamentary Left. He has friends and followers in both camps. If his name is put up for President, both the Congress and the Communists will support him. In fact, he will probably win by the largest margin since Dr Radhakrishnan in 1962. For Sen is a figure of such commanding authority that even the BJP might offer opposition that is only 'token'.

Although I do not know either man, it would not surprise me if the possibility that Amartya Sen would make a good President has already crossed Dr Manmohan Singh's mind. (Crucially, despite his long residence abroad, Sen is still an Indian citizen.) They are old and close friends—so close indeed that one of the Harvard man's recent books was released at the Prime Minister's residence. Their mutual respect and affection is manifest. Dr Singh will know what a man like Sen will do for India's place in the world. And he knows also what Sen can do for the Congress's currently fraught relations with the Communists. In fact the economist is, if anything, venerated even more widely among left intellectuals and party workers than among the Congress mainstream. On the greatness of Amartya Sen there is perfect accord between Prakash Karat and Buddhadeva Bhattacharya, and, what is perhaps more striking still, between the two of them on the one side and Dr Manmohan Singh on the other.

Making Amartya Sen President would be good for that august office, better for the country's foreign policy, and still better for its domestic politics. And it would be good for Sen himself, as the perfect climax to a glittering career. Sen is what in middle-class circles used to be known as 'career first-class first', except that the exams he passed and topped were rather more substantial than those conducted by Indian universities. The holder of named chairs at Harvard, Oxford, and the London School of Economics; Master of Trinity College, Cambridge; President of the American Economics Association; winner of the Nobel Prize; author of some books that have transformed the landscape of modern thought and of other books that have been best-sellers—Sen has been there, and done everything. There are no more prizes left to be won, except that of the President of India.

The fifth reason why Amartya Sen should become President is that it would be good for Bengal. The province and its peoples have a history of more-or-less legitimate laments against the rest of India. In 1905 Bengal was partitioned, thus to divide Hindus and Muslims and make the province

itself less important to India as a whole. Six years later the partition was annulled, but then the capital was shifted from bustling, sparkling, Calcutta to that decrepit old place, Delhi. In the 1920s, a scheming bania from Gujarat conspired to oust the great C. R. Das from the leadership of the national movement. In the 1930s, the bania promoted, as his successor, an aristocratic Allahabadi above the equally talented Subhas Chandra Bose.

After Independence the discrimination has continued. Through the long period of Congress rule, West Bengal was denied its fair share of Central funds, while the policies of 'freight equalization' sought to undermine its industrial pre-eminence. After the Communists came to power in Kolkata, the Centre tried repeatedly to destabilize them. They failed, but when in 1996 Jyoti Basu should have become Prime Minister it was a Delhi cabal (this time a Communist one) which thwarted his chances. Finally, in 2004, India's most successful cricket captain, a Bengali, was replaced by a less qualified man from Karnataka.

In the past, the heroes of modern Bengal have all had victory cruelly snatched from them, snatched, as it were, at the finishing line. Subhas Bose should have been the first Prime Minister of India. Jyoti Basu should have become the first Communist Prime Minister of India. Saurav Ganguly should really still be cricket captain of India. But if Amartya Sen does become President, all those failures and humiliations will be forgotten. Bengal and the Bengalis will have what they have long hoped for and, indeed, deserved—a man who was a winner at the end.

### **CALLING IT QUILTS**

The day the Mumbai crowd booed Sachin Tendulkar after his failure in the third Test against England, another Indian legend was formally, finally, leaving his field. This was Dr Verghese Kurien, who announced that day that he was resigning as Chairman of the Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation. This coincidence got me thinking—when, and in what manner, must an acknowledged master of his profession call it quits?

It must be said at once that Indians are not very good at retirement. Perhaps the example of that old graybeard Bhishma Pitamah is too compelling. He went into battle at a very advanced age, thus to provide a mythical justification for warriors and rulers down the ages to keep going, and going. Jyoti Basu might have been the last Indian politician to retire from office, and he was pushing ninety at the time. L. K. Advani is the wrong side of eighty, but seems still to hope to become Prime Minister of India the next time around. M. Karunanidhi is even older, but one suspects that he harbours the same ambition, with a slightly lesser one in reserve. That is, if he cannot become Prime Minister, perhaps he can yet enjoy one more term as Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu.

As one who supports neither party—indeed, supports no party at all—I can dispassionately observe that the BJP and the DMK have not been helped by Advani's and Karunanidhi's zest for



life and—dare we add—power. Much the same could be said about Verghese Kurien and the co-operative movement. Without question, this Malayali who became a Gujarati built and nurtured both the Anand Milkowners Union Limited (AMUL) and the National Dairy Development Board. And, again without question, he stayed on far too long. For at least a decade now he has been an embarrassment to those he trained but would not allow to exercise their independent authority. It was a former protégé, Amrita Patel, who had finally to ask him to leave the NDDB, and it is other protégés who have now compelled him to leave the GCMMF.

Dr Kurien is a very distinguished Indian, whose distinction has been somewhat sullied by his refusal to retire and let the younger generation take over. Will the same happen to Sachin Tendulkar? Since administrators go on much longer than cricketers, we might say that Sachin is now where Dr Kurien was, say, ten or fifteen years ago. It was when he was about seventy (he is now 84) that the great milkman showed his first signs of fallibility. That was when he started getting into scrapes with his juniors, these based on his refusal to accept that they might have good reason for seeing the world of rural co-operatives somewhat differently from him. Over the years, the gap between him and those he trained has only widened. Sadly, it is he who, each time, has had to retire hurt. This eventuality could have been avoided if he had the grace or good sense to leave before he was pushed.

It is in this last twelvemonth that Tendulkar has shown his first signs of fallibility. On the flat pitches that are prepared for one-day matches he remains a very good player. In that form of the game he is still indispensable to the Indian team, in part because he can also chip in handily as a fifth bowler. But in Test cricket, where the pitches afford greater help to bowlers and where the pressures can be far more intense, he has seemed increasingly vulnerable. One still sees flashes of the old Tendulkar, as in his 35th Test hundred, when he played the great Muttiah Muralitharan with complete assurance. He went from 88 to 100 with three marvellous boundaries in a single Murali over, two drives past cover and a flick through the on side. But at other times he has looked very ordinary indeed. The behaviour of the Mumbai crowd in booing him was unconscionable. It must still be said that the shot that got him out that day was played by a man not just out of form, but also not entirely in control of his nerves. He looked jumpy from the time he got to the crease, poked around for fifteen minutes before he got off the mark, and then hung out his bat to a short wide one to be caught behind the wicket.

Tendulkar now goes off to have his shoulder attended to. He will be out of the game for two months at least. It is too early for him to contemplate retirement. He will, indeed should, be an integral part of our 2007 World Cup campaign. But the question is already being asked—how long shall he go on? If, after he returns to cricket, he does not score regularly and well in Test cricket, that question will be amended to—how long must he go on?

The one Indian cricketer who timed his retirement perfectly was the first of the great Bombay batsmen, Vijay Merchant. He quit the game after scoring a hundred in Delhi in what was, interestingly enough, the first Test of a five match series. Unlike so many others, he went out at

the top of his game. And unlike them he sought an alternate career outside cricket and an alternate passion outside it as well. Merchant spent the day working, and by all accounts working hard, in his family's textile business. After office hours and on weekends he worked for the rights of the disabled and handicapped. Some Indians thus knew him as an old cricketer, some others as an established entrepreneur, and yet others as a selfless social worker.

Outside of sport, the Indian I know who gave up power gracefully is the scientist Obaid Siddiqui. A Fellow of the Royal Society, Siddiqui built a centre of biological research in Bangalore, getting the land, raising the funds, building the buildings, recruiting young scientists and technicians, and preparing a plan for their research. In other words, he was to the National Centre for Biological Sciences exactly what Dr Kurien was to the NDDB or Mahatma Gandhi to the Indian nation—its founder, or shall we say its father. However, while still in his early sixties, Siddiqui handed over as Director to an able younger colleague. Perhaps more crucially, he has not since offered him a single piece of gratuitous advice. And so the NCBS is exactly what its founder hoped it to be—a truly world-class institute of scientific research, that will continue to be world-class long after he himself has gone.

In the context of modern Indian history, men like Vijay Merchant and Obaid Siddiqui are altogether exceptional. Politicians go on too long, cricketers go on too long, social workers go on too long, scientists go on too long. The refusal to retire is an Indian disease. For sportsmen it is caused by a failure to recognize the signs of age, for politicians by an unwillingness to give up on the perquisites of power. Sometimes (as in the case of the peerless Ravi Shankar) the desire to stay in the limelight is occasioned by the wish to see one's progeny rise to prominence while one is still around to help.

As I said, the time has not yet come for Sachin Tendulkar to leave the field. When it does, one must hope—for his sake and ours—that the manner of his leaving is as becoming as the manner of his entering it, all those very many years ago.

## **THE END OF THE BIOGRAPHER**

Many years ago, while doing research on the life of the anthropologist Verrier Elwin, I found myself in the library of the great old publishing house of John Murray, on Albemarle Street in central London. Elwin had once been a Murray author; and so had been some far more distinguished people. One such was the poet Lord Byron. Indeed, I sat working in the very room where had occurred one of the most notorious acts of literary vandalism, the burning of Byron's papers.

When Byron died in 1818, his memoirs were with John Murray, awaiting publication. However, his colleagues now prevailed upon the publisher to abandon the project. The 'memoirs were fit only for a brothel and damn Lord Byron to certain infamy if published', said one friend. Another

friend urged John Murray to ‘destroy whatever writing of his [that] might be discreditable to his fame’. Eventually, a bonfire was made of Byron’s memoirs and of hundreds of his letters.

A century later, the papers of another great writer were set ablaze. This time the arsonist was the author himself. This was the novelist Henry James who, in the evening of his life, asked his friends and family to return the letters he had written them. Once they had all come back to him, he burnt them in his own garden.

James’s intention was similar to that of Byron’s friends—to forestall a future biographer from excavating the secrets of his life. But, as one could have predicted, the effort was in vain. There were plenty of letters that had escaped his attention, so many in fact that his eventual, and magisterial, biographer, Leon Edel, wrote a five volume biography that tracked James’s life day-by-day and week-by-week, if not quite hour-by-hour. Adding insult to injury, Edel then proceeded to edit a five volume collection of James’s letters in the original.

As for John Murray, later generations of the publisher’s family came to regret and atone for that original act of destruction. They made assiduous attempts to collect letters to, by and about Byron, eventually depositing some 10, 000 of these in the National Library of Scotland where they can be consulted by those who wish to write about Byron’s fame and, if they so wish, his infamy.

Letters are to a biographer what water is to a fish (or spin bowlers to Mahendra Singh Dhoni). Without them he could not live. With them he lives luxuriantly. My own biography of Elwin was only made possible by letters that he had written to others, and which had since been preserved. Elwin came out to India in 1927; and lived here until his death in 1967. In those years he wrote to his mother in England twice a week; and to his sister Eldyth once a week. In the 1980s, Eldyth Elwin lived in a nursing home outside Oxford, where she was visited by Dr Richard Bingle, a archivist of legendary ability (and charm) who worked with the India Office Library and Records in London. Dr Bingle asked whether she had any materials of her brother’s. The old lady signalled to her nurse, who pulled out a black box from under the bed. Inside were thousands of handwritten letters from her brother. It took Dr Bingle’s legendary charm to persuade her to part with them. Now they constitute the core of the ‘Verrier Elwin Collection’ at the British Library.

I have often wondered—what will happen to the art of biography in this age of email? In the old days, letters were written because there was something to say, and because there was little else to do. In the image-saturated world we now live in, time off from work is so easily spent in a movie theatre, surfing the Net, or watching television. Few people write letters any more. And those that do get written are the terse, uncommunicative mails that seem so depressingly typical of this ‘age of communication’. And even with regard to these emails—what happens to them, finally? Are they ever collected and filed? Where will one look for them in the future?

In retrospect, one might come to look upon the 19th and 20th centuries as the golden age of biography. In these centuries, serious attempts were made to classify and preserve records in

archives properly protected from the dust and the monsoon. In these centuries, people of historical importance—politicians, generals, writers et. al.—wrote letters long in length and rich in emotion. Things now are all too different. The great figures of the 21st century will pose special and possibly insurmountable problems for those who choose to write their lives. As one whose own subjects lived in the past, I can have only pity and compassion for the biographers of the future.

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### NEHRU AND NIRALA

Many years ago, the anthropologist Triloki Nath Pandey told me a story featuring Jawaharlal Nehru and the poet Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala'. The Prime Minister had just returned from a visit to the People's Republic of China. He was addressing a public meeting in his home town, Allahabad, where Nirala then lived and where Triloki Pandey then studied. The poet sat in the front row, bare-bodied, his chest rubbed up with oil—for he, a passionate wrestler, had come straight from a session at the akhara. He cut a striking figure, the shining torso contrasting with the white beard and shock of white hair.

Nehru accepted a garland or two from his admirers, before launching into his speech. 'I have come from China', he began, 'and heard there a story of a great king who had two sons. One was wise, the other stupid. When the boys reached adulthood, the king told the stupid one that he could have his throne, for he was fit only to be a ruler. But the wise one, he said, was destined for far greater things—he would be a poet'. With these words, Nehru took the garland off his head and flung it as an offering at Nirala's feet.

This is a wonderful story, which sounds better (and rings truer) in the original Hindi. Recently, I came across some documentary proof that Nehru did, indeed, have both affection and admiration for Nirala. This is tucked away in an appendix to *Five Decades*, D. S. Rao's history of the Sahitya Akademi. The Akademi was formally inaugurated on the 12th of March 1954, at a function held in the Central Hall of Parliament. The next day, the Prime Minister wrote a letter about Nirala to the Akademi's newly appointed Secretary, Krishna Kripalani. Nirala, said Nehru, had 'done good work in the past and even now sometimes writes well in his lucid moments.' His books were still popular, and widely read and used as textbooks. But, 'in his folly or extremity', Nirala had 'sold all those books for a song to various publishers getting just 25 or 30 or 50 rupees. The whole copyright was supposed to be sold'. Thus 'publishers have made large sums of money and continue to make it', while Nirala 'gets nothing from it and practically starves'.

This, commented Nehru, was 'a scandalous case of a publisher exploiting a writer shamelessly'. He urged the Akademy to work on an amendment of the copyright law so that Indian writers would be better protected in future. Then he continued: 'Meanwhile, Nirala deserves some

financial help. It is no good giving the help to him directly because he gives it away to others immediately. In fact, he gives away his clothes, his last shirt and everything'. At the moment, it was his fellow poet Mahadevi Varma 'and some others in Allahabad of a Literary Association' who 'try to look after [Nirala] and give him some money too'. The Prime Minister suggested that the Akademi sanction a monthly allowance of a hundred rupees to help Nirala, and that this money be given to Mahadevi Varma to use on his behalf.

On the 16th of March the Secretary of the Sahitya Akademi wrote back to the Prime Minister. He had spoken to his Minister, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who 'has agreed that a sum of Rs. 100/ a month should be sanctioned for [Nirala] and paid to Srimati Mahadevi Varma'. This was lightning speed so far as government decision-making went—three days from conception to execution.

That a Prime Minister would find time to write a letter suggesting a stipend for an indigent poet—and direct also how best this stipend could be administered—this is the kind of thing nearly inconceivable in the India we now live in. But it was, I think, of a piece of the India of Nehru and Azad. Nor was such a tendency then restricted to the ruling Congress party. For D. S. Rao's book also quotes some very learned letters on the functioning of the Akademi in its early years, written by the Communist M. P. Hiren Mukherjee and the then out-of-work statesman C. Rajagopalachari.

Among Nirala's contemporary admirers are Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Vikram Seth, English poets with a developed understanding of Hindi literature. We get some sense of how great a poet he was in David Rubin's *Selected Poems of Nirala*, though, as always, some of the greatness is lost in translation. Rubin says that in terms of genre and theme, 'the range of Nirala's poetry is far greater than that of any other twentieth-century Hindi poet'. His own selection contains poems on nature, politics, poverty, myth, language and love. These lines, from a poem titled (in English) 'Wild Jasmine', may serve as a ironic if unintended commentary on the subject of this column:

'Then I began to muse some more along that line:

If I had been some prince's son

I wouldn't suffer these disgraces.

Just think how many scholars would be my hangers-on,

heads bowed and hands stretched out for my largesse.

I'd give a little—and take much more.

And all the papers—unanimously!—would chant my praises.'

## THE FIRST 'GANDHIAN' INTELLECTUALS

While Mahatma Gandhi was alive, not many intellectuals would willingly identify themselves as 'Gandhian'. Writers and thinkers treated him, at best, with a kindly indulgence; and, at worst, with unremitting hostility. The first group admired the Mahatma's asceticism and personal integrity and, were they Indian, his ability to move the masses and draw them into the anti-colonial struggle. However, they were not inclined to take his ideas seriously, viewing them as impractical and idealist. The second group dismissed him as a mystical humbug, an obscurantist who worked malevolently to draw the masses away from revolutionary action into the safe channels of bourgeois reformism. From this perspective, it was hard to credit Gandhi as having any 'ideas' at all; or, if one did, to attach to them those damning prefixes, 'reactionary' and 'medieval'.

Scholars and scientists who lived in the time of the Mahatma were happy to call themselves 'liberal' or 'socialist' or 'conservative' or 'Marxist'. So far as I can tell, there were only two intellectuals who would go so far as to call themselves 'Gandhian'. One was the economist J. C. Kumarappa. Kumarappa studied in London and New York, and gave up a flourishing career as an accountant to join Gandhi and the national movement. He worked for many years on rehabilitating the agrarian economy on ecological lines. His own legacy, so long forgotten, is now itself undergoing a rehabilitation. The American Gandhian Mark Lindley is about to publish a study of Kumarappa's economics; and two younger Indians of my acquaintance have embarked on a full-fledged biography of the man.

The other intellectual contemporary of the Mahatma who was not shy of the label 'Gandhian' was the anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose. Born in 1901 (nine years after Kumarappa) Bose studied and taught at Calcutta University, his academic career interspersed with spells of service in the nationalist cause. He was arrested in 1931 during the Salt Satyagraha; and spent a year in prison. He was again arrested during the Quit India movement of 1942; this time he spent three-and-a-half years in jail. His last spell of nationalist service was in 1946-7, when he served as Gandhi's secretary and interpreter as the Mahatma went on a walking tour through the riot-torn villages of eastern Bengal.

In 1934, N. K. Bose published *Selections from Gandhi*, one of the first, and still one of the best, anthologies of the Mahatma's thought. The book covered an astonishingly wide range of themes: from Gandhi's ideas on religion and morality to his writings on the Congress and on self-government more generally. It was an effort both comprehensive and precocious; notably, it had separate sections on 'Women's Problems' and on education.

*Selections* was the first of three major books by Bose on Gandhi. In 1940 he brought out his *Studies in Gandhism*, whose analytical chapters focused on the theory and practice of non-violence. Thirteen years later, he published *My Days with Gandhi*, a moving memoir of the days

spent in the field in Noakhali, the book combining a deep appreciation of Gandhi's work in dousing the flames of communal passion with a skeptical attitude towards his experiments with brahmacharya.

Bose's contributions to anthropological literature were scarcely less significant. He wrote profusely in English as well as Bangla, on themes as varied as the temple architecture of Orissa, the structure of Hindu society, and the condition of adivasis. He was a gifted lecturer too; forty years after he had heard Bose speak on Gandhi to his class at Lucknow University, the anthropologist T. N. Madan recalled his talk to me, topic by topic if not quite word for word. As his biographer Surajit Sinha has written, he played a formative role in the 'building [of] an Indian Tradition in Anthropology'. For many years he edited the journal *Man in India*. Bose also served a three-year term as Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. The reports he wrote then still repay reading, as models of empathetic and socially engaged anthropology.

Like his master Gandhi, Bose was a man of considerable character and steely will. A friend once told me of a seminar he had attended when Bose was in the advanced stages of cancer. Here, a young man from a rural background accused anthropologists of being voyeurs; their research into rural India, he claimed, was never of benefit to the villagers themselves. Bose urged him to take a more holistic perspective; the results of science and scholarship, he pointed out, accumulate slowly, and help humanity only in the long-term. Suppose a medical researcher wanted to study Bose's own condition, and suppose he made it clear that the knowledge thus gained would help cure cancer only well after this particular patient had fallen victim to the disease. Should Bose refuse to be examined on the grounds that the research would be of no immediate benefit to him? Or should he instead encourage a growth in knowledge that might actually be of help to other humans in the future? The parable was profoundly Gandhian, as indeed was its unspoken lesson—that the cancer sufferer must submit himself to the experiment even if he did not stand to gain from it himself.

## **GANDHI AND SCIENCE**

Shelley once claimed that poets were 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'. In the decades and centuries since he said this, it has been scientists rather than poets who have been the world's legislators, and acknowledged ones, too. The power and prestige of modern science is colossal indeed. The prestige comes from science's manifest successes in augmenting human welfare, the power from its even more striking ability to perfect ever more deadly means of warfare. It is scarcely an accident that the best scientists usually live and work in countries that are rich as well as strong. Here they enjoy an extraordinary veneration, symptomatic of

which was Time Magazine's anointing of Albert Einstein as the 'Person of the Century', ahead of other contenders from the worlds of politics, social service, literature, and the arts.

However, modern science has not been without its critics. Even as it has grown in influence and strength, an array of writers, scholars and—yes, poets—have arraigned it for its intellectual arrogance, its lack of ecological sensitivity, its willingness to put itself at the service of the state. Modern science, it is argued, is a totalizing philosophy that brooks no dissent, which dismisses out of hand non-modern and non-Western systems of thought. Modern science gives birth to technologies that wilfully destroy the environment—as for example large dams and nuclear power plants. And many scientists themselves have been ready to justify and legitimize the destructive deeds of nations and politicians.

Within India, by far the best-known critic of modern science is the sociologist Ashis Nandy. Nandy worries that science 'is threatening to take over all of human life, including every insterstice of culture and every form of individuality'. He believes that scientists are amoral and opportunistic, prone to claim credit for the good done in the name of science, while hastily repudiating the evil. They try to 'sell the idea that while each technological achievement marked the success of modern science, each technological perversity was the responsibility of either the technologist or his political and economic mentors, not that of the scientist'. At one place, he goes so far as to write that 'science is the basic model of domination in our times and the ultimate justification for all institutionalized violence'.

Notably, in his own attacks on modern science Ashis Nandy invokes the support of Mahatma Gandhi. Nandy claims that 'Gandhi rejected the modern West primarily because of its secular scientific worldview'. He further writes that 'Gandhi's rejection of modern science is by far the best known theme in his attack on the West'. Characteristically, there are no attributions for these statements, no indication of where and when Gandhi said the things Nandy claims he said.

In fact, Gandhi did not reject modern science. But he certainly sought to humanize it, to make it non-violent and of relevance to the lives of the poor. Perhaps the best summation of his views on science (and scientists) is contained in a speech he delivered to a group of college students in Trivandrum in March 1925. Here, Gandhi observed that

It is a common superstition in India, and more so outside India—because that is what I find from my correspondence in Europe and America—that I am an opponent, a foe, of science. Nothing can be farther from the truth than a charge of this character. It is perfectly true, however, that I am not an admirer of science unmixed with something I am about to say to you. I think we cannot live without science, if we keep it in its right place. But I have learnt so much during my wanderings in the world about the misuse of science that I have often remarked, or made such remarks, as would lead people to consider that I was really an opponent of science. In my humble opinion there are limitations even to scientific search, and the limitations that I place upon scientific search are the limitations that humanity imposes upon us.'



Gandhi went on to say that he appreciated the urge that led scientists to conduct basic research, to do 'science for the sake of science'. But he worried that scientists and science students in India came overwhelmingly from the middle class (and upper castes), and hence knew only to use their minds and not their hands. His own view was that it would be 'utterly impossible for a boy to understand the secrets of science or the pleasures and the delights that scientific pursuits can give, if that boy is not prepared to use his hands, to tuck up his sleeves and labour like an ordinary labourer in the streets'. For only if one's 'hands go hand in hand with your heads', could one properly place science in the service of humanity. As Gandhi put it to those students in Trivandrum:

Unfortunately, we, who learn in colleges, forget that India lives in her villages and not in her towns.

India has 7, 00, 000 villages and you, who receive a liberal education, are expected to take that education or the fruits of that education to the villages. How will you infect the people of the villages with your scientific knowledge? Are you then learning science in terms of the villages and will you be so handy and so practical that the knowledge that you derive in a college so magnificently built—and I believe equally magnificently equipped—you will be able to use for the benefits of the villagers?'

Perhaps the most authentic advocate of a 'Gandhian science' in contemporary India is the Garhwali social worker Chandi Prasad Bhatt. As a pioneering environmentalist—it was he who started the 'Chipko' movement—Bhatt has critiqued the ways in which science has both centralized power and led to environmental degradation. He has been in the forefront of the opposition to monocultural forestry and large dams, state schemes which have claimed the mandate of science. Yet, like Gandhi, Bhatt also understands that technical knowledge can and has been put to humane use, when informed by an ecological sensibility and attention to social deprivation.

Because he lives on a remote Himalayan hilltop, and because he writes little and this mostly in Hindi, Chandi Prasad Bhatt is far less well known than he should be. But from the odd things he has published one can discern a perspective on science that is truer to the spirit of Gandhi than the ideas attributed to the Mahatma by Ashis Nandy. Bhatt has written insightfully on forest conservation, urging a creative synthesis between the 'practical knowledge' of peasants and the 'latest scientific knowledge' of the state. He has called for a decentralized approach to planning, and has himself pioneered the dissemination of 'appropriate' rural technologies such as biogas plants and micro-hydel projects. While keen to listen to and learn from the 'people', he doesn't always romanticize folk wisdom either. It is not just science which has to be reformed, he argues; but also local practices which, in an altered ecological and demographic context, have become unsustainable. He has thus noted that in the hills, terracing on very steep slopes and free-range grazing are no longer viable for either society or for nature.

I think it very unlikely that Chandi Prasad Bhatt has read the speech that Gandhi made to students in Trivandrum in 1925. Yet, through his wanderings in the world, and his deeply developed moral sense, he has arrived at an understanding of modern science that is congruent with Gandhi's. In his own, more modest way, Bhatt has also influenced the direction of scientific research and application. One of his early efforts was to persuade a young engineer to work on upgrading the indigenous water-mill, or gharat. Traditionally used to grind grain, this device, suitably refined, was now able to generate electricity enough for local needs. Reporting this experiment, Bhatt remarked that 'the hills want exactly this type of technology. But to produce it, engineers and scientists would have to first become rustics and devote themselves to the Himalayas to understand exactly what they want'.

How strikingly similar, in intent, are Bhatt's words to the exhortation by Gandhi previously quoted, for the science students to make sure their 'hands go hand in hand with your heads', since it would be 'utterly impossible for a boy to understand the secrets of science or the pleasures and the delights that scientific pursuits can give, if that boy is not prepared to use his hands, to tuck up his sleeves and labour like an ordinary labourer in the streets'.

### **AN ADIVASI CHAMPION**

In the first week of February 2002, I got a call from the writer Mahasweta Devi. I had met Mahasweta only once—in a boarding house in Delhi where we both happened to be staying—but knew, of course, a great deal about her. I had not read her novels—I don't read much fiction—but had been profoundly moved by her field reports on the condition of that most disadvantaged section of Indian society, the adivasis. I had read these reports in the 1980s, as they appeared in those remarkable little journals, *Frontier of Calcutta* and the *Economic and Political Weekly of Bombay*. (They have now been collected in book form in *Dust on the Road: The Activist Writings of Mahasweta Devi*.) These essays detailed, with great sensitivity but also with a sometimes barely suppressed anger, the exploitation of adivasi labour, the stealing of their land, the plundering of their forests.

Mahasweta's reports were mostly from the tribal districts of the Chotonagpur Plateau. At the time, the region was witnessing the renewal, albeit in more militant forms, of the old tribal demand for a separate state of Jharkhand. By official figures, some Rs 3000 crores had been spent by the Government on 'tribal development' in Chotanagpur. Where this money had gone it was hard to say, for the people still lived in 'a primeval darkness'; without schools, hospitals, roads or electricity, with their lands seized by outsiders and their forests closed to them by the state. And the oppression was not merely economic; Hindu and Christian missionaries pressed the tribals to change their faith, and give up their own traditions of art, dance, and music. 'The Jharkhand demand is set against such a background', reported Mahasweta: 'Tales of woe and exploitation on the one hand; the pulse of resistance on the other'.

However, when Mahasweta rang me from Calcutta in February 2002, it was not about the oppression of tribals, but with regard to the persecution of another vulnerable minority in democratic India, the Muslims. The riots in Gujarat were into their second week. Disturbing reports were coming in of state complicity, of mobs being aided by officials in identifying Muslim homes and shops, of the police idly looking on. Mahasweta had written a strong letter to the President of India, appealing to him ‘to immediately intervene as the constitutional head of the country to protect the lives of innocent citizens and prevent the carnage from spreading any further’. She wanted me to ask U. R. Anantha Murty to write likewise to the President. Anantha Murty wrote an equally forceful letter—and, as we now know, the President wrote himself to the Prime Minister of the day, but to little avail.

Two years later I met Mahasweta for the second time—in, as it happens, Gujarat. She had come to inaugurate an Academy of Tribal Learning, whose moving spirit is the scholar and activist Ganesh (G. N.) Devy. Devy was once a professor of literature, an esteemed and distinguished one. But, inspired by Mahasweta, he gave up his career to work among the adivasis of western India. His group, Bhasha, has done outstanding work among tribes stigmatized by society and persecuted by the police. They have also published many volumes of tribal folklore and literature—as its name suggests, among Bhasha’s aims is to protect tribal languages from being swallowed up by the wider world.

The new Academy of Tribal Learning seeks to impart humanistic education to adivasi boys and girls. It is located in Tejgarh, in the Bhil country. We drove there from Vadodara, through land looking unnaturally green. The rains had been heavy that year—excessively heavy, in fact. When we reached Tejgarh we found that the bridge that linked the Academy campus to the roadhead had been washed away. We had thus to walk through slush and mud, which was unpleasant for us all, but more so for the chief guest. For Mahasweta was a full twenty years older than the company, and seriously diabetic, too.

We reached the Academy, admired its elegantly understated brick buildings, and had our meeting. Later, Devy asked us to accompany him on a tour of the campus. Mahasweta insisted on coming. The paths were wet—or non-existent. Here and there they had been colonized by thorny bushes. And it was raining. Every now and then, Mahasweta was asked whether she had had enough. The enquiry was made out of sympathy, for at her age and in her physical condition the struggle seemed too much to bear. Someone then said, with impatience rather than in jest, that they didn’t want to be held responsible if she collapsed. Mahasweta answered that would indeed be a perfect death—for where else would she want to be cremated than in an Academy of Tribal Learning?

Watching Mahasweta that day, I was reminded of that she had told me over the phone that morning in February 2002: ‘hum maidan nahin choddenge, hum maidan nahin choddenge’. She is, in a word, indomitable. On 14th January this year she turned eighty years of age. Happy birthday, Mahasweta. May you stay on the field a good while yet.

## MAHADEV

A book I cherish greatly, and which I bought in the great Sunday book bazaar in Delhi's Daryaganj—since closed by a philistine police force—is a 75th birthday tribute to Mahatma Gandhi. Four hundred pages long, beautifully bound and printed (at the Karnatak Printing Press, Bombay—also probably by now a victim of history), it assembles essays by truly diverse hands, such as Nehru, Kripalani, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Nandalal Bose among the Indians, and Einstein and Pearl Buck among the foreigners. Of the forty contributions all but two are about the Mahatma. The first is a remembrance of the recently deceased Kasturba, reproduced from Gandhi's autobiography. The second is an essay on Mahadev Desai by the anthropologist and writer Verrier Elwin.

Elwin's essay is an encrusted little gem. It begins by stating what his subject meant to him, but moves quickly on to what he meant to the Mahatma. Mahadev Desai was officially Gandhi's secretary, but actually 'he was much more than that. He was in fact Home and Foreign Secretary combined. He managed everything. He made all the arrangements. He was equally at home in the office, the guest-house and the kitchen. He looked after many guests and must have saved ten years of Gandhi's life by diverting from him unwanted visitors'.

If this was not enough, Mahadev was also 'Gandhi's Boswell', the recorder of his words, the scribe who presented his Master's Voice to all India, and beyond. Thus 'Mahadev's task was to make Gandhi real to millions. He made him perhaps the best known man in the world, certainly the best loved. The punctual, vivid, intimate stories that appeared week by week in *Young India* and *Harijan* displayed to readers all over the world a personality so lovable that love was inevitably aroused in response'.

In Mahadev's portrait of Gandhi, writes Elwin, 'the politician was somewhat in abeyance. That was natural for Gandhi as a politician is fully represented by his own speeches and statements. It was Mahadev's special privilege to be able to show the world the Mahatma off the stage and below the platform.' And where Mahadev excelled was 'in showing us Gandhi the debater....He was never more pleased than when he could show his Bapu confounding an opponent in argument, putting him down, chuckling him out of countenance. I used to suspect that sometimes he deliberately introduced people into Gandhi's presence for the express purpose of sharpening his wit and enabling him to display his truly marvellous powers of debate'.

The journalist Mahendra Desai, who edited Mahadev's diaries, and whose father Valji Desai was also a close associate of the Mahatma's, once told me that it was Elwin's essay that inspired the full-length biography of Mahadev written by his son Narayan. From this book—written originally in Gujarati and published in English translation under the title *The Fire and the Rose*—

we learn that Mahadev Haribhai Desai was born on the first day of 1892 in a village in the Surat district. He displayed, early on, a love of literature both Gujarati and English. At fourteen, he passed the matriculation examination of the Bombay University. He then moved to Bombay, where he took a first class in his B. A., majoring in Philosophy and Logic. The next step—very logical for an Indian of his social and educational background—was to take a law degree.

Mahadev qualified as a lawyer in 1915, the year Gandhi himself returned to India. It was through the younger man's love of literature that they met. Mahadev had translated the liberal thinker John Morley's book *On Compromise* into Gujarati, and went to Gandhi to seek his advice on how best to get it published. Over the next two years they met off and on, each becoming progressively more impressed with the other. Finally, in November 1917, Desai decided to join Gandhi full-time. For the next twenty-five years he lived with him and for him. As the historian Rajmohan Gandhi observes, 'Waking up before Gandhi in pre-dawn darkness, and going to sleep long after his Master, Desai lived Gandhi's day thrice over—first in an attempt to anticipate it, next in spending it alongside Gandhi, and finally in recording it into his diary'.

Twenty-two years younger than Gandhi, Mahadev yet died five-and-a-half years before him. Narayan Desai's book begins with a moving account of Mahadev's passing, in the Aga Khan palace where Gandhi and he had been confined when the Quit India movement began. He spent his last hours on earth with his head on Gandhi's lap. When he finally stopped breathing, Gandhi called out in agitation: 'Mahadev! Mahadev!'. Later, when asked why he did so, the Mahatma answered: 'I felt that if Mahadev opened his eyes and looked at me, I would tell him to get up. He had never disobeyed me in his life. I was confident that had he heard those words, he would have defied even death and got up'.

Mahadev had served his Master for most of his life, but the last act of service was to be Gandhi's. He bathed the body himself, albeit 'with shaking hands'. Then he chose to wrap Mahadev in the coarse sheets available in the jail—'as befitting the death of a prisoner'. Then he lit the fire, such that—in Narayan Desai's words—'he who had been the father all his life now performed the duties of a son'.

## **THE GREAT HELMSMAN AND THE GOOD BOATMAN**

A social activist I greatly admire recently began a public lecture by saying: 'We cannot all be Gandhi or Mao, but we can at least try and imbibe some of their spirit'. For a man of my age the juxtaposition made some—if not perfect—sense. But it would perhaps have escaped the many in the audience who were much younger than me. And it certainly would have angered those much older.

Can one speak, in the same breath, of Gandhi and Mao? One was a reformist who talked of the beauty of compromise, who thought that social change should come about through non-violent means, and who never held public office. The other was a militant revolutionary, who believed that the national and social revolutions could be accomplished only with the aid of the gun, and who ran the Chinese Communist Party for forty years and the Chinese State for twenty-five. Orthodox Gandhians would comprehensively reject the placing of their mentor's name alongside Mao's. So, for other reasons, would orthodox Maoists.

The social worker who put the two leaders side-by-side came of political age in the late sixties and early seventies. At that time, China was in the grip of the second of Mao's great experiments, the Cultural Revolution. It was not then known—outside China, at any rate—that twenty million had perished in his first such experiment, the Great Leap Forward. Anyway, this new experiment sought to declass the intelligentsia, to bridge—or abolish, rather—the gap that separated the middle class mandarins from the workers and the peasants. University professors were pulled out of their classrooms and sent to work in the countryside, armed only with the Little Red Book of their Chairman's Thoughts.

To a young, sensitive, idealistic Indian, it seemed to bring Gandhi to mind. Had not the Mahatma also spoken of abolishing the division between mental and manual labour, of making the Brahmin do the work of the Bhangi? It was clear that, despite twenty years of Independence, distinctions of status and class were pervasive in Indian society. Congressmen had moved into the offices and bungalows left behind by the departing British, and installed themselves as the new ruling caste. Khadi, once the livery of freedom, now signified the corruptions and seductions of power. There had been some progress in the cities, but the villages were still caught in the vice of feudalism.

On four occasions in the last century, thousands of young and middle-class Indians have come, collectively, to sacrifice family and career in a higher cause. The first three occasions were Gandhi's great struggles: the non-co-operation movement of 1919-22, the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-4, and the Quit India movement of 1942. The fourth such act of collective renunciation was not mandated by a leader from above. Rather, it was an uncoordinated response to a deepening social crisis in the country. The nineteen sixties witnessed two wars, two deaths of Prime Ministers, successive failures of the monsoon, and an alarming dip in foreign exchange reserves. There were desperate scarcities of food in the villages, and shortages of essential commodities in the cities. If there ever was a time when India—the whole of India, that is—was not 'shining', it was this.

These multiple crises produced, in the late sixties and early seventies, the fourth—and to date, last—great burst of idealism among the Indian middle class. For the young man or woman seeking to identify more directly with the poor, there were three paths to choose from. One was mandated by Mao, that of armed revolution. Thus hundreds of students left their colleges to join the Naxalite movement. A second was mandated by Gandhi, that of social service. Thus a good

many young teachers and doctors took to the villages to begin schools and hospitals. But there was also a third path, which partook mostly from Gandhi but was also (at some level) influenced by Mao. This combined social work with social activism. It sought not just to bring succour to poor villagers but to seek greater rights for them from the state. These, so say, left-wing Gandhians organized satyagrahas around land and forest, worked with dam-displaced people, and began human rights organizations.

The paradigmatic Gandhian-Maoists probably were the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini of Bihar. This was the organization of students which brought Jayaprakash Narayan back into agitational politics after decades spent as a social worker. Notably, when, in 1974, 'JP' decided to launch a countrywide movement against the Indira-Congress Raj he gave it the name 'Total Revolution', a label that might have been coined by Mao himself. Meanwhile, in Bihar, the Chatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini began a movement against one of the State's largest and most brutal landlords, the Mahant of Bodh Gaya. This adopted a technique which was named 'peaceful class struggle'. That is, the landless were organized against the landlords on class lines, but instead of shooting the oppressor they fasted and struck work. The analytical grid, in other words, was Maoist; but the techniques of protest were Gandhian.

The good Indian I quoted at the beginning of this article began her own career as a social worker, helping rural artisans form co-operatives and get a better deal for their products. In time she became a social activist, building a popular movement against the Government of her State, a movement aimed at ending corruption in the administration and which has involved dharna and morchas as much as village and committee meetings. However, while her language is occasionally somewhat Marxist, she or her colleagues have never fired a gun in anger (or in love, either).

I am a good ten years younger than her. And I have never been a social worker, still less a social activist. But when I was coming of age intellectually, it was not uncommon to hear of Gandhi and Mao being talked of together. Both identified with the poor and oppressed rather than the rich and propertied. Both organized mass campaigns among the peasantry, a class that constituted the bulk of the population yet were treated with condescension by the elite. Both were anti-imperialists whose successful ending of colonial rule in their countries could inspire contemporary struggles against the World Bank, multi-national corporations, and other manifestations of 'neo-colonialism'.

It seemed almost natural among progressive Indians then to bring the two men together, as in a book by the Calcutta political scientist Jayantuja Bandopadhyaya, published in the late seventies, and called, simply, Gandhi and Mao. In the early eighties the Delhi sociologist Ashis Nandy wrote several essays praising Mao and Gandhi as 'critical traditionalists', who stood apart from gung-ho modernists on the one hand and the uncritical (or reactionary) traditionalists on the other. In the late eighties I myself published an essay on the agrarian origins of Indian environmentalism which began by invoking Gandhi, and ended by saluting Mao.

I would not make the same mistake now. For mistake it indeed was. The evidence of Mao's crimes since accumulated by historians is hard to ignore and impossible to refute. Mao was directly responsible for the deaths of millions of people. His latest biographer, Jun Chang, puts the figure at seventy million. Even if you bring this down by half (as other, more cautious scholars would) he still ranks as one of the greatest mass murderers of all time. His dark deeds in power comprehensively nullify any achievements we might credit to him, such as the nurturing of a sense of pride and national mission in a defeated and subjugated people.

The signal lesson of the twentieth century is that democracy is much to be preferred to totalitarianisms of left or right. As a ruler and power-wielder, the autocratic Mao might be contrasted to our own first Prime Minister who, despite his many errors of policy and practice, stayed resolutely committed to the democratic ideal, and whose personal integrity and love of country was as complete as his Master's. Goodness knows India needs honest and capable politicians as much as it needs fearless yet committedly non-violent social activists. I would therefore like to rework my friend's injunction, and say: 'We cannot all be Gandhi or Nehru, but we can at least try and imbibe some of their spirit'.

## **KASTURBA**

The wives of the leading Indian nationalists lie shrouded in obscurity. Tagore, Nehru, Patel, Rajagopalachari, Bose, Ambedkar—in the meticulous documentation of their careers, their spouses figure scarcely at all. One reason is that in most cases the wives died early; another that even while they lived the wives were expected to stay out of sight.

The great exception, of course, is Kasturba, wife of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Born in 1869, the same year as the Mahatma, she lived till 1944. She bore him four children, ran his various homes, and went several times to jail for his cause. That she lived so long, and played her part in public campaigns, are two reasons why she is part of the nationalist consciousness. A third reason is that the man she married was the greatest of modern Indians. A fourth is that he wrote about her, and at some length, too.

In Gandhi's autobiography, he speaks with characteristic frankness about their relationship—about how he imposed upon Kasturba his radical ideas about celibacy, the simple life, and the removal of untouchability. 'I was a cruelly kind husband', writes Gandhi: 'I regarded myself as her teacher, and so harassed her out of my blind love for her'. He reproduces, with a honesty only he could summon, their conversation when he decided to give away ornaments gifted to them. Kasturba reminds him that he had once forced her to surrender the jewels her parents had given her. Now, he sought 'to make sadhus of my boys', deny their wives any jewellery, and take away a necklace gifted her by admirers. 'Is the necklace given you for your service or for my service?', asks Gandhi, sharply. Kasturba's answer deserves to be enshrined—the metaphor is inescapable—in letters of gold: 'I agree. But service rendered by you is as good as rendered by



me. I have toiled and moiled for you day and night. Is that no service? You forced all and sundry on me, making me weep bitter tears, and I slaved for them!’

The words must have even more eloquent in the original Gujarati. Gandhi comments that ‘these were pointed thrusts, and some of them went home. But I was determined to return the ornaments. I somehow succeeded in extorting a consent from her. The gifts received... were all returned’.

It is fair to say that those Indians who know of Kasturba know her through her husband’s recollections, directly, or as amplified on the screen. However, the narrative of Gandhi’s autobiography ends with the Khilafat-Non-Co-operation movement of 1919-21. In the decades to follow Kasturba continued to live a very interesting life indeed. She was jailed during the Salt Satyagraha, and again during the Quit India movement. She lived and worked alongside her husband, and continued to argue with him.

Some glimpses of this later phase of Kasturba’s life are contained in a charming memoir by Sushila Nayar, now long out of print. Nayar writes here of Kasturba’s stature in the national movement, of how ‘she had become the Ba (mother) to India’s millions’. She writes also of her bonds to her sons and their children, and of her own child-like love of the game of Carrom (which Kasturba played daily while incarcerated in Poona, always expecting to win). There is a wonderfully moving account of her last illness, and her wish to have, close to her, their long estranged son Harilal. He had rebelled early against the father, but stayed devoted to the mother—and she to him. Nayar does not however tell the story of how, when Gandhi’s train once stopped at Katni station, they heard a cry: ‘Mata Kasturba ki jai’. This was most unusual, for the cheers usually were for the more celebrated husband. It turned out to be Harilal, ‘looking very poorly in health, with all his teeth gone and his clothes in rags’. He walked up and handed over an orange to Kasturba. When Gandhi asked what he had brought for him, Harilal answered: ‘Nothing. If you are so great, it is because of Ba’.

After Kasturba’s death in 1944, a trust was formed in her memory. Now in its sixtieth year, the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust is headquartered at Indore, and has branches in as many as 22 states. It runs schools for women and children, as well as craft centres. Also under its purview is a well-equipped women’s hospital in Sewagram, where I once met Sushila Nayar, still serving, in what turned out to be the last year of her life. Other outstanding social workers associated with the Trust have included Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Ashoka Gupta, and Radha Bhatt. I have heard it said that the Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Trust is perhaps the most genuinely Gandhian of all the Gandhian institutions still around.

Having read thus far, readers of this column will know what is coming—surely it is past time that we have a proper historical biography of Kasturba? There is a book in the market which presumes to be one, but it is far too sentimental and poorly sourced to really qualify. But for the prospective biographer there is material aplenty—memoirs by Gandhi, Sushila Nayar and others,

government records and newspaper archives, and letters by her sons. I think I know just the person—I will try persuading her at once.

## **A TOTALITARIAN TREAT**

Even before it became the IT capital of India, Bangalore was the least left-wing of Indian cities. When it was merely a cantonment town it exuded an air of placid contentment; that air is now aggressive, suffused by the competitive urges of capitalism—but it remains largely inhospitable to Communist thought. In other Southern capitals, Hyderabad and Chennai and (most of all) Thiruvananthapuram, one finds well defined and fairly active communities of Marxist intellectuals. But not now or ever in my home town.

It was therefore with some surprise that I chanced upon, in a small pavement stall on the busy M. G. Road, a copy of a 1951 biography of Joseph Stalin. Compiled by six men, who made so bold as to give their names, it was published in English and for international distribution by the Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow. It a peach of a book, which gives a new meaning to the term ‘hagiography’. It portrays an indefatigable revolutionary, a brilliant thinker, a human being courageous beyond measure. Yet hiding behind the boiler-plate is a deep insecurity—with regard to Stalin’s intellectual pretensions, and with regard to his fitness for his job.

When the book was published Stalin had run the Soviet Union for more than two decades. But he still wasn’t sure whether he was worthy of filling his predecessor Lenin’s shoes. This explains why this biography, written under Stalin’s direction, presents him as a precocious and always loyal disciple of the founder of the Soviet state. We learn how, as a young man, Stalin read Lenin’s journal *Iskra* and ‘completey identified himself with its policy’, while conceiving ‘a boundless faith in Lenin’s revolutionary genius’. Indeed, ‘he took Lenin’s path as his own. From this path he has never swerved; and when Lenin died, he confidently and courageously carried on his work’.

Stalin was—or so we are told—‘Lenin’s most loyal disciple and associate and the most consistent champion of his ideas’. His work among the oil workers of Baku, itself a ‘brilliant application of Lenin’s policy’, apparently ensured that this city and its neighbourhood became ‘a citadel of Bolshevism’. We are then informed that the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda* was ‘founded according to Lenin’s instructions, on the initiative of Stalin. It was under Stalin’s direction that the first issue was prepared and the policy of the paper decided’.

Stalin needed to establish his legitimacy as Lenin’s successor, but also his claims to being an authentically original Marxist thinker. It was in exile that Stalin wrote his *Marxism and the National Question*, a work ‘on which Lenin set the highest value’. His writings of this period are assessed, one described as ‘remarkable’, another as ‘brilliant’, a third as ‘an outstanding

contribution to Bolshevik thought' which, inspired by Lenin's 'historic work' What is to be Done?, 'resolutely upheld and developed the ideas of that genius'.

When Lenin returned from exile in April 1917, it was apparently Stalin, who, 'with a delegation of workers', went to meet him at the station. At this time 'Stalin was at the centre of all the practical activities of the Party'. During the October Revolution, 'Stalin was Lenin's closest associate. He had direct charge for all the preparations for the insurrection'. Once victory was won, he helped his leader in solving the national problem of the USSR. 'There is not a single Soviet republic in whose organization Stalin did not take an active and leading part'. 'Lenin and Stalin were the inspirers and organizers of the great Union of Soviet Socialist Republics'.

In January 1924, Lenin died, as even Communists must. Now 'the banner of the Party was taken up and carried on by Lenin's distinguished disciple, Stalin—the finest son of the Bolshevik Party, Lenin's worthy successor and the great continuator of his cause'. Having succeeded Lenin and seen off his rival

Leon Trotsky, Stalin, 'with the farsightedness of genius', turned to the building of the national economy through socialist industrialization. Here, 'there was not a

single sphere or aspect of industrialization that escaped Stalin's attention'.

In a speech of 11 December 1937, Stalin, addressing 'the voters of the Stalin election district, Moscow' [what a lovely name for an election district!], 'pointed to the fundamental difference between elections in the U. S. S. R., which are free and democratic in every sense of the word, and elections in capitalist countries, where the people are under the pressure of the exploiting classes'. In this election season 'the whole country listened to the speech of the sage and genius, their leader. His words sank deep into the minds of the working people'. When the ballots were counted, 'of a total of 94, 000, 000 voters, over 91, 000, 000, or 96.8% went to the polls; 90, 000, 000 people voted for the Communist and non-Party bloc, a fervent testimony to the victory of Socialism... And first among the elected of the people, first among the deputies to the Supreme Soviet, was Stalin'.

The narrative of the book then turns to World War II, where 'the leader and teacher of the working people, Comrade Stalin, took command of the armed forces of the U. S. S. R. and led the struggle of the Soviet people against a malignant and treacherous enemy, German fascism'. Displaying 'a proper mastery of the art of war', this 'wise leader of armies, with whose name on their lips the Soviet soldiers went into battle, foresaw the development of events and bent the course of the gigantic battle to his iron will'. The man of action did not forget the work of the mind, for even 'while directing the operations of the Soviet armed forces..., Comrade Stalin during the war continued his intense theoretical activity, developing and advancing the science of Marxism-Leninism'.

In February 1946, fresh elections were held to the Supreme Soviet. These were ‘an eloquent and convincing demonstration of the loyalty of the Soviet people to the Bolshevik Party, to the Soviet Government, and to their beloved Stalin. The candidates of the Communist and non-Party bloc received 99.18 per cent of the vote...’ (It might have been this very election which provoked Bertold Brecht to write that if the people were ever so foolish to oppose or criticize the Party, the party could always ‘elect another people’.)

The last chapter of the book salutes Stalin ‘as ‘the Lenin of today’. It speaks of how ‘in all their many languages the people of the Soviet Union compose songs to Stalin, expressing their supreme love and boundless devotion for their great leader, teacher, friend and military commander.’ But it also notes that ‘millions of all workers in all countries look upon Stalin as their teacher, from whose classic writings they learn how to cope with the class enemy and how to pave the way for the ultimate victory of the proletariat’. And this is its final, glorious paean: ‘Stalin’s whole work is an example of profound theoretical power combined with an unusual breadth and versatility in the revolutionary struggle... His work is extraordinary for its variety; his energy is amazing. The range of questions which engage his attention is immense, embracing the most complex problems of Marxist-Leninist theory and school textbooks; problems of Soviet foreign policy and the municipal affairs of the proletarian capital; the development of the Great Northern Sea Route and the reclamation of the Colchian marshes; the advancement of Soviet literature and art and the editing of the model rules for collective farms; and, lastly, the solution of most intricate problems in the theory and art of war’.

From this book it might appear that while Jesus and the Prophet, Rama and Yudhishtra, had the odd flaw, Stalin emphatically did not. In fact, in 1956, or a mere five years after this book was written, Stalin’s own successor, Nikita Khrushchev, decisively repudiated his legacy, accusing him of committing shocking crimes against the Russian people. Later historians have documented how the myth of Stalin’s infallibility was manufactured. Writing of the founding of the Pravda newspaper, Robert Conquest says, ‘Stalin arrived in St. Petersburg when all the arrangements for its publication were well advanced. It would later be claimed that the whole enterprise was his, but in fact it was largely managed by the Okhrana agent Malinovsky, and the first editor was another Okhrana agent’.

Although this book of 1951 was a pack of lies, there are three reasons why I have resurrected it here. First, because of its intrinsic interest. Second, because it might have been the very book through which countless Communist activists in India—including some now in the highest echelons of the CPI and CPM—first learnt to love and revere Stalin. Third, because it may give some useful ideas to future biographers—sorry, hagiographers—of Atal Behari Vajpayee, Sonia Gandhi, Bal Thackeray and J. Jayalalithaa.

## THE FORGOTTEN PRIME MINISTER

Debates may rage on who was India's best Prime Minister, but there can be no question of who has been its most unjustly forgotten Prime Minister: Lal Bahadur Shastri. This remains so even in this, the centenary year of his birth. His memory was briefly exhumed on his hundredth birthday, 2 October 2004, when, at a desultory function in Delhi, he was described by a Union Minister as a 'devoted disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and a legendary loyalist of Jawaharlal Nehru'. And that, it appears, was the end of the commemoration for the year—and perhaps for all time to come.

Shastri was both a disciple of Gandhi and an admirer of Nehru, but he was also his own man. Born in Mughalsarai, in a Kayasth family of modest means, he studied first with a maulvi and later at the Kashi Vidyapeeth. His commitment to the nationalist cause came early, and remained steadfast. He spent some nine years in jail (in seven stints) while working his way up the Congress ladder. After Independence, he played a key role in organizing his party's campaign in the first General Elections of 1952. He then served for several years as Union Railway Minister, before resigning after a serious train accident for which he felt he must own moral responsibility.

Because of his small size—he was barely five feet tall—and his self-effacing nature, Shastri was consistently underestimated by all those around him—whether journalists, officials, or fellow Ministers. But one who properly appreciated his qualities of head and heart was Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1961 Nehru brought Shastri back into the Cabinet. For the next three years he was (as one contemporary put it) 'India's premier compromiser, conciliator and co-ordinator'—the 'most popular man in the Congress party and the main channel of communication between Nehru and the party organizations'. Among the crises he solved at the Prime Minister's behest were those caused by language riots in Assam and by the theft of a holy relic in Srinagar's Hazratbal mosque.

In and out of office, Lal Bahadur Shastri acquired a reputation for probity of character unusual even in those generally honest times. When he was asked to demit office under the Kamaraj Plan in 1963, Shastri wrote to an associate of how, without a Minister's salary, his family had decided now to eat one less vegetable every meal and to wash their clothes themselves.

When Nehru died Shastri was chosen by the Congress to succeed him. These were difficult years, with the country's morale affected by defeat in the war with China, continuing tensions in the borderlands, and serious scarcities of food. Shastri met these challenges with resolve and fortitude. He called for the planners to lay a greater focus on agriculture, and himself supervised the re-organization of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research. On the industrial front, he rejected the prevailing 'export pessimism', arguing that India had both the capital and the expertise to begin exporting chemical and engineering products as well as traditional agricultural commodities such as tea and rubber. (As it since has.)

Within a year of taking office Shastri had proved himself capable of filling Jawaharlal Nehru's somewhat outsize shoes—this even Nehru's sister and daughter were now willing to recognize. But one who persisted in underestimating the little man was Field Marshal Ayub Khan of Pakistan. In August 1965 Pakistani-backed infiltrators began fomenting trouble in the Kashmir Valley. When Indian army units chased them back over the border, Pakistan mounted a massive offensive in the Chamb sector of Jammu. The enemy tanks rolled menacingly on. Now Shastri pulled off a master-stroke, by asking the Indian Army to march into West Punjab. This at once relieved the pressure on the Jammu sector and took Indian troops tantalizingly close to the great city of Lahore. A cease-fire was called, to be followed by a peace agreement brokered by the Soviet Union, which mandated that both sides pull back to the positions they had held before 5 August 1965.

His conduct during the 1965 War made Shastri a hero—and justly so. His character comes through best in two speeches he made, one at the onset of the conflict, the other at its end. On the 13th of August, after the evidence of mass infiltration into Kashmir had become manifest, the Prime Minister spoke to the nation on All India Radio. Now that the country's freedom and sovereignty were threatened, he said, Indians must set aside their partisan loyalties, those differences in policies and programmes that, in times of peace, were such 'an essential part of our democratic set-up'. And he issued this stern warning to the other side: 'If Pakistan has any ideas of annexing any part of our territories by force, she should think afresh. I want to state categorically that force will be met with force and aggression against us will never be allowed to succeed'.

The other speech was made at a public meeting at the Ram Lila grounds in Delhi on 26th September, after hostilities had ceased. Here he took issue with a BBC report that claimed that 'since India's Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri is a Hindu, he is ready for war with Pakistan'. Shastri said that while he was indeed a Hindu, 'Mir Mushtaq who is presiding over this meeting is a Muslim. Mr Frank Anthony who has addressed you is a Christian. There are also Sikhs and Parsis here. The unique thing about our country is that we have Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis and people of all other religions. We have temples and mosques, gurdwaras and churches. But we do not bring this all into politics. ... This is the difference between India and Pakistan. Whereas Pakistan proclaims herself to be an Islamic State and uses religion as a political factor, we Indians have the freedom to follow whatever religion we may choose [and] worship in any way we please. So far as politics is concerned, each of us is as much an Indian as the other'. Like Jawaharlal Nehru before him, Shastri upheld the idea of India as a multi-religious country where politics and faith were kept in separate compartments. However great the provocation, at least while he was around India would never become a Hindu Pakistan.

Lal Bahadur Shastri died on the night of 10/11 January 1966, in the Uzbek city of Tashkent, hours after signing a peace agreement with Pakistan. He spent but nineteen months in office, enough to show himself to advantage as a war leader. That, if at all, is how he is remembered today. But had he been lucky to enjoy a full term in office his legacy might have been more

wide-ranging. For he had interesting and (to this writer) innovative ideas in the fields of economic and foreign policy, among much else. He was keen to get rid of the sloth and waste in government, and to induct talent from outside—one of his suggestions, unfortunately never implemented, was to have top scientists inducted as Cabinet Ministers.

Lal Bahadur Shastri was a man of some considerable achievement and also, being a politician, of the odd failure as well. This column has saluted the achievements; the next one will highlight Shastri's one serious failure as Prime Minister.

## **TWO BROWN SAHIBS**

In the days when V. S. Naipaul could still bring himself to praise somebody else, he wrote of C. L. R. James's *Beyond a Boundary* that it gave 'a base and solidity to West Indian literary endeavour'. James's opus, he remarked, was 'one of the finest and most finished books to come out of the West Indies, important to England, important to the West Indies.' Naipaul compared *Beyond a Boundary* to Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, likewise 'part of the cultural boomerang from the former colonies, delayed and still imperfectly understood'.

In truth, the James/Chaudhuri comparison extends well beyond their most famous books. These close contemporaries—with Nirad babu being only five years older—were both raised in lower middle-class homes they were determined to escape from. Both were autodidacts, who went, perfunctorily, to school and college while pursuing their education by their own means and under their own instruction. Both had a capacious curiosity about most of human creation—about literature, of course, but also about history, politics, art and music. Both were men of an uncompromising integrity, personal as well as intellectual. They seem to have been akin even in their faults. Thus both excelled in thick description; of books, homes, characters and events. Yet both had mistaken pretensions to theory. The first attribute resulted in superbly evocative autobiographies, the second ambition in eminently forgettable works of meta-history.

Both James and Chaudhuri had a lifelong fascination for European, especially British, civilization. This made them unpopular with their compatriots, whose hatred of British colonialism had blinded them to the glorious creativity of the British people. But the courage of James and Chaudhuri was such that they were willing to risk personal popularity in favour of intellectual honesty. Both studied European civilization closely, and took from it what they required. Both chose to spend their last years in England, though it is not without significance that while Chaudhuri settled in the prosperous town of Oxford, James settled in the poor London locality of Brixton.

Nirad Chaudhuri first visited his Mother Country at the advanced age of fifty-five. The invitation came, courtesy the British Council, after the spectacular critical success of Chaudhuri's

autobiography. The book of his travels is called *A Passage to England*; characteristically, there is more here about the author than his presumed subject. By contrast, James first visited England in 1932, when he was relatively young, and completely unknown. He did not publish a book about his experiences, but he did write a series of dispatches for the *Port of Spain Gazette*, which, some seventy years later, have now been collected in a neat little volume called *Letters from London*.

In his preface to this book, the West Indian critic Kenneth Ramchand writes that James was ‘at ease in England, confident about his intellectual superiority, and apparently able to live comfortably with a quota of discrepant attitudes and interests’. These ‘London Letters’ reveal a man whose ideas are in flux, whose mind is still being shaped. There is an open-minded curiosity about the world that one does not find in his (or Nirad Chaudhuri’s) mature work. But there is also a proper respect for the achievements and depth of European civilization. There are awed descriptions of a Rodin statue and of a fourteenth century clock whose maker was unknown, but which would still ‘probably be there in a thousand years, tick-ticking away’. But—and here too he is not unlike Chaudhuri—there is also a proper contempt for the degraded contemporary products of this civilization. Particularly noteworthy are James’s comments on the vulgarity of the popular British newspapers, whose technological sophistication did not preclude an aesthetic vulgarity. Commenting on their obsession with crime and sex, James asks: ‘What in the name of heaven is the use of a newspaper press being able to turn out 168, 000 copies an hour if it is only printing the rubbish that it does?’

*Letters from London* shows James walking and seeing, but also listening and arguing. The friends he made were British, but also other colonials. Their ‘conversations were rarely frivolous’, covering, among other topics, ‘D. H. Lawrence, Bolshevik Russia, sex, the Indian question, British Imperialism, Abyssinia, coloured students in London, the English people...’. One night he spent talking about Rabindranath Tagore with a girl whose race and nationality he sadly does not reveal. Otherwise too he displays a notable interest in matters Indian: he speaks knowledgeably about C. F. Andrews, for example, and about the Quaker-inspired Friends of India Society.

Those who know the work of both writers might argue that the James/Chaudhuri comparison breaks down when it comes to politics. One was a man of the left, the revolutionary left; the other a stalwart of the conservative, even reactionary, right. I myself believe that it was not so much politics as aspects of personality that divided the two men. Let alone Tagore, I do not believe Chaudhuri ever discussed Mozart or Clausewitz with a girl: matters of high civilization, in his view, were best left to men. By contrast, these letters show James at ease in the company, the intellectual company, of women. We also have here an appealing lack of vanity. Unlike Nirad Chaudhuri, and certainly unlike V. S. Naipaul, James does not consider himself to be in a class apart from his fellow humans.

I think this difference is not unrelated to C. L. R. James’s love of cricket, which Chaudhuri did not share. And James did not merely love cricket, he also played it to a fairly decent level. He



thus knew what it was to fail, to be bowled first ball or to be driven for four fours in an over. As a self-described ‘second-class’ cricketer, he came to admire the truly first-class ones—such as Don Bradman, Keith Miller, and his own great compatriot, Learie Constantine. As much as the library, it was the playing field that helped prepare James for life. An acknowledgement of his own vulnerability, and an admiration for the superior talents of others—these came to him chiefly through his experience and understanding of cricket.

Regrettably, cricket was not a game Nirad Chaudhuri was known to play or watch. His appreciation of British civilization was thus somewhat incomplete, since it did not embrace cricket, or indeed the other great sports invented by the British. In this respect (if in no other) this Bengali iconoclast is akin to the legion of North American critics who have made their careers writing about C. L. R. James—this despite not knowing the difference between a googly and a bumper. Some years ago, when these ‘post-colonial’ critics produced a collaborative volume on their hero, they foolishly asked the British historian E. P. Thompson to write an afterword. Thompson supplied them one paragraph where, after saluting James’s ‘deeply cultured intelligence’ and his ‘delight and curiosity in all the manifestations of life’, he pointedly remarked; ‘I’m afraid that American theorists will not understand this, but the clue to everything lies in his proper appreciation of the game of cricket’.

### **A MAN TO MATCH HIS MOUNTAINS,**

On this, the fifty-seventh anniversary of Indian independence, I wish to write about the Indian of my acquaintance who best combines past with present. He is in his early fifties, his name is Shekhar Pathak, and he lives somewhere in the Himalaya—somewhere, but we do not know exactly where. For he is a gumakkad, a traveller and seeker who lives for and loves our beautiful hills—its peoples, its cultures, its rivers, its threatened landscapes. Sometimes Shekhar Pathak is in the upper reaches of the Alakananda valley, tracing the ancient routes of the Bhotiya herders who once traded across the Himalaya with Tibet. At other times he is down in villages by the river-bed, recording the stories of women who participated in the Chipko Andolan. Occasionally he comes down to the burning plain, to speak to audiences in Delhi and Patna about the beauty and tragedy of the Himalaya. And once a year he parks for a few weeks in the hill town of Naini Tal, while he edits and prints a remarkable literary journal on the Himalaya, published in Hindi, and called, simply, Pahar.

I am myself an arm–chair intellectual of the worst kind, for whom a journey out to Chennai is a massive expedition. I stay at home, but through the wanderings of Shekhar Pathak I have come to learn a good deal about the Himalaya. For in the twenty years that I have known him, he has peppered me with letters from locations as far–flung as Ladakh and Arunachal, Sikkim and Himachal, allowing me to see these places through his eyes.

I used once to get postcards from Shekhar Pathak; these have now been replaced by electronic mails. His address is well named for an itinerant on the road: parikramavaasi@hotmail.com. Very typical is this email I received on the 20th of July 2002. This told me that he had just ‘come back from a wonderful journey of Qomolongma (Everest). We trekked in Rongshar and Kaama valleys, which are east of Qomolongma, for ten days. We saw the flowers, rivers, lakes, the Drokpa people, yaks, many gompas, and the real wilderness of this part of the Himalaya. ... It was raining and for many days and we were not able to understand the impact of the great mountains—Makalu, Qomolonjo, Lhotse and Qomolongma—as we were not able to really see them. After continuous trekking for nine days one morning we were able to have the whole range of the great mountains in front of us. It was a lifetime experience. All these [mountains] were talking with the sky but their feet were close to us’.

The letter continued: ‘Then we went to Rongbu glacier side. This is the north face of Qomolongma and the British expeditions tried to reach the top from this side in 1921, 22 and 24. In the final expedition Mallory and Irvine lost their lives. We drove up to the base camp and trekked a further five/six kms. We got really wonderful views. All this is captured by me in my diary and photos’.

This must have been a hard and exciting trek, but harder and more exciting still was a march completed by Shekhar Pathak this past summer. This lasted six weeks, and extended over as many as 1100 kilometres. The trek covered the extent of the state of Uttaranchal; starting in the village of Askot, on the Nepal border in the east, it ended in the hamlet of Arakot, which touches Himachal Pradesh to the west. The march went up high hills and down low valleys, and crossed the great Himalayan rivers. The marchers slept in caves and in disused shepherds’ huts, waking up to touch the snow on the mountains.

This was, in fact, the fourth time that Shekhar Pathak had traversed his native state. The first time was in 1974, when, of course, Uttaranchal itself did not exist. Four college students took part in the first ‘Askot-Arakot Abhiyan’; Kunwar Prasun, Pratap Shikhar, Shamsher Singh Bist, and Shekhar Pathak. All were participants in what was then a very intense struggle for a separate hill state. In the years since, the four marchers have, in their own ways, stayed true to their youthful idealism. Prasun is a widely respected journalist; Shikhar, a widely respected social worker; Bist, a veteran activist of progressive social movements in the hills.

As for Pathak himself, he took a Ph D in history, writing a pioneering thesis on the system of forced labour in Uttarakhand. For the past two decades he has taught at the Kumaun University in Naini Tal, where he is now Professor of History. Among the few perks that come with being an Indian academic are long holidays spread out over the year. Where his fellow teachers put their feet up, Pathak takes his back-pack and hits the road—or should we say, the narrow mountain trail. Every year, he must do at least a dozen field-trips small or large; and once every decade, in 1974, 1984, 1994 and 2004, he has undertaken the massive Askot-Arakot padayatra.

For Shekhar Pathak, passion and profession come together in his journal Pahar. ‘Journal’ is probably not the right word, for what we have here is a handsome-sized book in excess of 300 pages, finely designed and with many photographs. Twelve volumes have been printed since the first one appeared in 1983. There have been special issues on the Himalaya in the 18th and 19th centuries, on the freedom struggle in Uttarakhand, and on travel writing. Other issues have been more eclectic, ranging widely over the literature, geography, and ecology of the Himalaya. In addition to these book-sized volumes, Pahar has produced some twenty topical pamphlets, among which is a masterly analysis of large dams by the Chipko leader Chandi Prasad Bhatt.

The printed volumes of Pahar contain a vast and periodically enriched archive of the Himalaya. As, in its own way, does the mind of Shekhar Pathak himself. A student of mine once spent a week with Pathak, whereupon he named him ‘Encyclopaedia of the Himalaya’. His knowledge of his region is staggering. He has, it sometimes seems, visited almost every valley, and perhaps every hamlet, in Garhwal and Kumaun—and spoken to most of its peoples, too.

Shekhar Pathak is a true ‘organic intellectual’, a man steeped in the history, ecology, legends, and myths of his native Uttarakhand. He has a profound regard for the great men and women the region has given birth to, from the poet Sumitranandan Pant to the campaigning journalist Bishambar Dutt Chandola, from the mountaineer Bachendri Pal to the Gandhian Radha Bhatt. He is himself an authentic hero of the Himalaya, and, beyond that, of modern India, a man who in his person and work helps safeguard, honour and deepen our hard-won but sometimes carelessly regarded political Independence.

I have, as I said, dozens of letters from Shekhar Pathak, these written from places I shall myself never see. Once, however, it fell to me to visit a mountain-side he had not been to. I had been invited to a conference in Ecuador, to be held in a small town high in the Andean mountains. Shekhar Pathak sent me a postcard before I left, wishing me bon voyage with a message that was characteristically brief, witty and wise. The message read: ‘Andes parvat ko Himalaya ka pranam’. And so, to the Andes, I carried the profound respects of a worthy son of its great mountain sister, the Himalaya.

### **VIGNETTES OF VAJPAYEE,**

In the last weeks of 1999, I was the recipient of a phone call from a Delhi bibliophile I knew slightly. The Prime Minister’s family, he said, felt that the time had come to suitably commemorate, in cold print, the life and times of the great man. They had asked the bibliophile, as the best-read person in their circle, to suggest a suitable biographer. He thought of me, for I had just then published a life of the anthropologist Verrier Elwin. Would I be willing to write a book on Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee?

When I demurred, the bibliophile assured me that there was no intention to ‘exploit’ my services. I would be well rewarded. The Oxford University Press had already agreed to publish the book. Besides, once it was out, government departments would order hundreds of copies each.

I answered that my hesitations stemmed not from a love of money but from an awareness of my inadequacies. True, I had just published a biography, but that was of an obscure Englishman who happened to marry an adivasi and write a few books. But how did that equip me to tackle the life of someone as elevated as our *pradhan mantri*ji?

This was the language of exaggerated deference, or *adab*, characteristic of the north Indian *doab* where both Mr Vajpayee and I grew up. It worked, in that my interlocutor did not further press the point. In truth, I declined the assignment because I knew that to write about men of power, in power, is a *mug’s game*. The family, and *coterie*, would expect a picture of cloying admiration. The biographer would enjoy no autonomy or independence whatsoever.

As it happens, not long after I declined this offer I was offered a commission which I accepted. This was to write a history of independent India. While working on this book, I have come across all kinds of intriguing characters. One of them is Mr Atal Behari Vajpayee, whose political life spans almost the entire period of Indian independence.

Early in my research, I came across a police report on a meeting in New Delhi in 1952 organized by the then fledgling *Jana Sangh*. This noted that a passionate speech had been made in praise of Lord Krishna by ‘Atal Behari’. The surname was not mentioned, so we do not know whether it was indeed our man. It might have been, for although he was but twenty-four, he had attracted the attention of the *Jana Sangh’s* founder and main leader, Dr Shyama Prasad Mookerjee. By this time, Dr Mookerjee’s chief preoccupation was the state of Kashmir. He had joined hands with a popular movement, led by the Hindus of Jammu, against the government of Sheikh Abdullah. They wanted the special status of Jammu and Kashmir to be revoked, and Abdullah himself to be removed. This was however rejected as a motivated, indeed communal, demand, by the Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru.

In the summer of 1953, Dr Mookerjee decided to visit Kashmir himself. On the 8th of May he boarded a train at Delhi Station. Significantly, the young Atal Behari Vajpayee was one of only four colleagues asked to accompany him. Atal Behari accompanied his leader to Pathankot, but did not go with him into the Valley, where Dr Mookerjee was arrested. It was in jail that he fell ill and died, sparking a chain of events that culminated in the arrest and removal from office of Sheikh Abdullah.

Four years later, Atal Behari became a member of the Lok Sabha. Thereafter his rise in the party was rapid. In a now little-known essay of 1960, Vajpayee set out his understanding of what the *Jana Sangh* should be. As he saw it, his party must be open to ‘all Indian citizens irrespective of creed or sect’. As he explained, ‘the decision to keep the party’s doors open to all citizens irrespective of religion or sect is not prompted by any considerations of political expediency, as

some critics would have one believe.’ To the contrary, insisted Mr Vajpayee, ‘the Jana Sangh holds that the state, by its very nature, is a secular body, and therefore it should not align itself with any particular religion or sect. The party, he wrote, ‘is opposed to politics being linked with religion, and also feels that religious institutions should confine their activities to their particular fields. In the partition of the country, we have already had a grim experience of the consequences of mingling politics with religion’.

Thus Mr Vajpayee, writing in 1960. What he said then appears to be at odds with what we think is the philosophy, and know to be the practice, of the Jana Sangh and its successor parties. And of its affiliates. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh believes neither in a secular state nor in not aligning itself with a particular religion. Indeed, in the very next year, 1961, the RSS and the Jana Sangh were incriminated in a major riot in Jabalpur. Over the following decades, as communal conflict intensified, the ‘sangh parivar’ was found to have played a role—sometimes a key role—in riots in places as far-flung as Jamshedpur, Moradabad, Bhiwandi, and Hubli.

How far Mr Vajpayee has been in step with them it is hard to tell. Did he see the demolition of the Babri Masjid as an egregious example of ‘mingling politics with religion’? (It was reported, at the time, that he felt ashamed at the demolition, but was instructed by his party not to make his shame public.) And what about the attempts, just prior to the last elections, to woo Muslims into the BJP? Were they prompted by a genuine wish to keep the party open to all regardless of creed, or merely by ‘political expediency’? And what of the critical remarks he has made from time to time about Narendra Modi, remarks later denied or withdrawn? In sum, is Mr Vajpayee a liberal thrown among fundamentalists, as some people believe, or is he simply a smooth-talking ‘swayamsevak’, a mask that shall not deceive?

Mr Vajpayee’s has been a long career in politics, and a most intriguing one too. It was he who had a last supper with Shyama Prasad Mookerjee before Mookerjee crossed into Kashmir, never to come back. It was he who, as early as 1960, sensed that restricting a party’s vote bank to just one creed did not make electoral sense. It was he who, when the first non-Congress Government came to power at the Centre in 1977, held the important post of Foreign Minister. And it was he who headed the first non Congress Government to complete a five year term in office. In this time Mr Vajpayee has had much to say or do with regard to some pretty momentous political events—such as the bomb blasts of 1998, the Pakistan peace initiatives of 1999, 2001, and 2003-4, and the Gujarat riots of 2002.

The political career of Atal Behari Vajpayee has had a profound bearing on some crucial turning points in the history of independent India. Of no one else, save Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, could one say that, for both good and ill, the life of the individual has so closely mirrored the life of the nation. Those other worthies have already had their (multiple) biographers. Mr Vajpayee awaits his. If a suitable candidate presents himself, I will be happy to introduce him to that loyal bibliophile in Delhi. But he must not be deterred by the mere fact of

the subject being out of power. For while his book will no longer be bought by government offices, it will still be most keenly read outside them.

Tags: Jana Sangh and the RS

### **A VICEROY'S READING LIST,**

The Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library house a vast number of manuscript collections relating to India. These include the records of the Secretary of State of India, the correspondence of Viceroys, and the papers of numerous officers of the Indian Civil Service. Other collections deal with the princely states, and with the important British mercantile firms in India.

For many years, these papers were housed in a grim grey building off Blackfriars Bridge Road, across the Thames, and not far from Lambeth Palace, the city home of the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1997, however, the India Office Library (as it was then known) was shifted to a new location in central London, adjacent to St. Pancras station. The shift was necessitated by the wish to have all the collections of the British Library under one roof.

Many theses and books have been written on the basis of the India collections of the British Library. If one is a historian of the Raj, it scarcely matters what your subject is—be it peasants or princes, Gandhi or Curzon, this is where you shall find the most abundant as well as the best preserved records.

I have myself spent hundreds of mostly pleasurable hours looking at the papers housed in the British Library. I have studied here the records of the Forest Department and of the Political Department. I have explored the collections of the last Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten, and of the great, pioneering anthropologist, Verrier Elwin. I have read faded microfilms of periodicals as varied as the London Times and Jayaprakash Narayan's Everyman's Weekly.

Once, searching for something more important, I came across a file donated to the British Library by a London bookseller named Truslove and Hanson. This contained letters written to the bookshop by Field Marshall Archibald Wavell between 1943 and 1946, when Wavell was Viceroy of India. During wartime, the supply of such non-essential goods as books was curtailed; and Indian bookstores are grossly inferior to London ones in any case. Hence these letters for books that Wavell wanted and, once he got them, presumably read.

Judging by the file's contents, this Viceroy of India had an astonishingly wide range of interests. Thus, among the books he ordered from Truslove and Hanson were the political scientist Harold Laski's 'Reflections on the Revolution of our Time', William Empson's work of literary criticism, 'Seven Types of Ambiguity', and the collected poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay. The

Viceroy seemed to have a taste for the classics—hence the request for copies of all volumes of the Cambridge New Shakespeare, ‘in the leather binding if available’. He liked humour both ancient and modern—thus the orders for G. Gordon’s ‘Shakesperean Comedy’, for Nancy Mitford’s ‘The Pursuit of Love’, and for the letters of George Bernard Shaw. Scripture was represented by R. A. Knox’s translation of the New Testament, art by a biography of the painter Augustus John and a book on the drawings of Leonardo Da Vinci.

Wavell had, it seems, an interest both in light fiction and serious history. He asked his bookseller for a copy of C. S. Forester’s recently published ‘Lord Hornblower’, but also for a book on ‘Carthaginian Peace’. As a military man, he requested a copy of de Chair’s edition of Napoleon’s memoirs, as well as a book that ‘has been recently published by a son of the late Mr. Roosevelt, recording some inside history of Mr. Roosevelt’s relations with Mr Churchill’.

One reason Wavell read so much was that he did not like to talk. One of his own generals, Sir Francis Tuker, wrote of ‘his extreme difficulty in talking to one or else his naturally laconic manner... He really did find it difficult to conduct a conversation of any length’. This impression is confirmed by an Australian Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies. During the Second World War, Menzies met Wavell in Egypt, where the Field Marshal was serving as Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces in the Middle East. Menzies hoped to have an extended conversation with Wavell, for he admired his military genius—besides, Australian troops formed a fair proportion of the troops under his command. To his dismay, Menzies found that Wavell ‘simply did not talk at all. He appeared to be blind in one eye, and this meant that when I sat next to him at table he would swivel his head right round, ninety degrees, fix me with the good eye, and say either “I see”, or “Maybe”, or “Um”, or nothing’.

Wavell had been sent to India by Winston Churchill as a sort of punishment posting. He was not one of the British Prime Minister’s favourite Generals; and India was not one of the Prime Minister’s favourite countries. Thus, when the Viceroyalty fell vacant in 1943, Churchill pulled Wavell out of his post in the Middle East and sent him to the sub-continent.

As Penderel Moon has observed, Churchill intended Wavell ‘simply to keep things quiet in India till the war ended’. For the Prime Minister was an implacable foe of Indian independence. But, once in Delhi, Wavell defied orders by working steadily towards that end. After the War ended, the Viceroy called a conference in Simla to try and work out an agreement between the Congress and the Muslim League. Wavell’s initiative was saluted by an Indian on his staff, V. P. Menon. The Viceroy, wrote Menon to a friend, ‘is a great man and I have a feeling that where great statesmen and politicians have failed a soldier is going to succeed’.

It was Wavell who pressed London to set a clear time-table for the British withdrawal, and it was Wavell who facilitated the formation of an Interim Government of Indians. It fell to his flamboyant successor to make the last, dramatic gestures that accompanied the end of the Raj.

Yet it was Wavell, not Mountbatten, who should get most of the credit for initiating the end of British rule in India.

Those who worked with the taciturn Field Marshall revered him. Consider thus the testimony of Ian Scott, who served as Private Secretary to both Wavell and his successor as Viceroy. Scott remarked of Wavell that ‘vanity, pomposity and other such weaknesses never touched him’; another way of saying that (unlike Mountbatten) he did not look to, or care about, how history would judge him. For his part, General Francis Tuker came to admire Wavell ‘immensely for his ruggedness and his absolute equanimity under misfortune, and for the fact that he never appeared to bear any grudge or resentment against anybody who during his career let him down or did him down. He never bore any resentment against Churchill for pushing him out of the Middle East, nor did he bear any resentment against the Cabinet for pushing him out of India in 1947... He was in this sense a very great man’.

It is a pity that there exists no serious biography of this intriguing and arresting figure. There are books aplenty on Mountbatten, but scarcely any on Wavell. I am told that one reason for this is that, like some other great Generals, Wavell had a partiality for his ADC’s. His family does not want this side of his character to be made public, and hence have barred his papers to scholars. One hopes that they will come to see sense. For a liking for young men has not prevented the English from recognizing and documenting the greatness of many other historical figures—such as Oscar Wilde, T. E Lawrence, and, indeed, Lord Mountbatten himself.

### **CHURCHILL IN BANGALORE,**

In October 1896 Winston Churchill reached Bangalore, then not a bustling megapolis but a small, sleepy, cantonment town. He liked the climate: ‘the sun even at midday is temperate and the mornings and evenings are fresh and cool’. He liked the house allotted to him: ‘a magnificent pink and white stucco palace in the middle of a large and beautiful garden’. And he was well served by his staff, who included a gardener, a water-carrier, a dhobi, and a watchman.

Life in Bangalore was pleasant, but also very boring. A young army officer yearned for ‘action’; but the only wars in India were then being fought at the other end of the subcontinent, on the Afghan border. So Churchill began a butterfly collection; this got to as many as sixty-five varieties, before it was attacked by rats. Simultaneously, he got down to the business of educating himself. After school he had been sent to the military academy in Sandhurst, and was consequently denied the benefit of an Oxbridge education. This left him with a serious chip on his shoulder, for whenever he met University men they would ‘pose you entrapping questions or give baffling answers’.

To get even, the young Winston ‘resolved to read history, philosophy, economics and things like that; and I wrote to my mother asking for such books as I had heard of on these topics’. The



books arrived, and the autodidact got down to work. He read four or five hours each day: historians like Gibbon and Macaulay, philosophers like Plato and Socrates, economists like Malthus, biologists like Darwin. These varied readings led him to question the basis of his religion. No longer could he accept the Bible as an accurate rendition of history; but he was not prepared either to abandon his faith and declare himself an atheist. There was no real need, as he saw it, to attempt to reconcile the Bible with modern scientific and historical knowledge. As he put it, 'if you are the recipient of a message which cheers your heart and fortifies your soul, which promises you reunion with those you have loved in a world of larger opportunity and wider sympathies, why should you worry about the shape or colour of the travel-stained envelope; whether it is duly stamped, whether the date on the postmark is right or wrong?... What is important is the message and the benefits to you of receiving it'. This process of self-learning is described in his memoir *My Early Life*, in a chapter suitably entitled 'Education in Bangalore'.

After eight months in Bangalore the young subaltern wrote to his mother summing up his life there. 'Poked away in a garrison town which resembles a 3rd rate watering place, out of season and without the sea, with lots of routine work and ... without society or good sport—half my friends on leave and the other half ill—my life here would be intolerable were it not for the consolations of literature....'.

Apart from butterfiles and books, there was also sport. In *My Early Life* there is a vivid description of a polo tournament in Hyderabad won by Churchill's regiment. Discreetly omitted from the memoir is what happened on that visit, outside the playing field. For it was in Hyderabad that Churchill fell in love for the first time. The lady's name was Pamela Plowden, and her father was a high official of the Indian Civil Service. She was, Winston wrote to his mother, 'the most beautiful girl I have ever seen—Bar none', and also 'very clever'. He hoped to take a tour of the city with her on elephant back, for 'you dare not walk or the natives spit at Europeans—which provokes retaliation leading to riots'.

The ride was taken, but it got nowhere. For Pamela's father would not allow his daughter to enter into marriage with an impecunious army officer. So Churchill returned disconsolately to Bangalore. He now sought, as his biographer writes, 'an opportunity to expose himself to the fire of any enemy of England who happened to be available at the moment'. He wrote asking to join Kitchener's advancing army in Egypt, but they didn't want him there. Ultimately, after his mother had pulled a few strings in London, he was invited by General Sir Bindon Blood to join the Malakand Field Force, which was battling truculent tribes on the North-west Frontier.

Churchill's son later wrote that his letters from Bangalore 'show that he thought he was in a prison'. So when the order for parole came he raced to redeem it. As he himself recalled, when Sir Bindon's telegram arrived 'I sped to the Bangalore railway station and bought a ticket for Nowshera. The Indian clerk, having collected from me a small sack of rupees, pushed an ordinary ticket through a pigeon-hole. I had the curiosity to ask how far it was. The polite Indian

consulted a railway time table and impassively answered, 2, 028 miles. Quite a big place, India! This meant a five days' journey in the worst of heat. I was alone, but with plenty of books, the time passed not unpleasantly.... I spent five days in a dark padded moving cell, reading mostly by lamplight or by some jealously admitted ray of glare'.

So the Indian countryside made as little impression on Churchill as had the sights in and around Bangalore. Books, English books, were preferable to either. 'Prison' or '3rd rate watering hole'; that is how he seems to have regarded my home town. Bangalore left no traces on him; what traces did he leave on it?

In Bangalore Churchill was bored, he was bookish, and he was butterfly-obsessed. And he was also (not that he reveals it in his memoirs) broke. Evidence of his financial penury is contained in the lounge of the Bangalore Club. There, under a display window, is a minute book open at a page where we can read, under the list of members who have outstanding dues, the name of 'Lieutenant W. S. Churchill'. The sum he owed (indeed still owes) the Bangalore Club was thirteen rupees.

From his own testimony and that of his biographers, we know how Churchill lived in Bangalore. Many people in the city, most especially perhaps brokers in real estate, are keen to know where he lived. Not long ago a friend of mine moved to Bangalore. After a few months in rented premises he sought to buy a bungalow in Whitefield, since he had been informed that it had once been the home of Churchill. Luckily he consulted me before signing the papers. I told him that in fact every owner of an old bungalow in the city claimed that it was once Churchill's. I myself write this in a room the tiles of whose floor tell me that they were made in the year 1865 by the Standard Brick and Tiles Company, Yelahanka. The room forms part of a building which is no longer a 'magnificent pink and stucco palace'. And the once 'beautiful garden' was long ago colonized by concrete. Still, I have only to point the visitor in the direction of those faded but still lovely red tiles, and say: 'Lieutenant Winston Spencer Churchill once lived here'.

Education in bangalore, My early life, Pamela Plowden, Churchill in india, Bangalore club

### **ECOLOGICAL PATRIOT,**

My wife and I were recently discussing people we admired. High on her list was the artist and writer Manjula Padmanabhan. She had just seen Manjula's evocative graphic 'Let it Grow': and had previously read and liked her play Harvest, her illustrated children's story City Market, and her very adult short story collection, Hot Death, Cold Soup. High on my list, indeed on top of it, was M. Krishnan (1912-96), likewise an artist and writer of varied gifts, originality of expression, and singularity of purpose.

Krishnan was, among other things, an accomplished writer in Tamil. He grew up in Mylapore, as the youngest son of the celebrated novelist and social reformer A. Madhaviah. Krishnan's own last work was a detective novel in his mother tongue. A posthumous collection of his Tamil essays, edited by the scholar and naturalist, Theodore Baskaran, has recently been published by Kalachuvadu Pathippagam under the title *Mazhaikkalamum Kuyilosaiyum*.

Krishnan was also a pioneering wildlife photographer. The camera he used was called (by himself and his acolytes) 'Super-Ponderosa'. It was put together from pieces garnered from here and there; a lens from East Germany, a cap and shutter from Malaysia, nuts and bolts from Burma Bazaar, the lot held together by some neighbourhood string. But it, and he, took staggeringly good pictures. Some are represented in a 1985 collection called *Nights and Days* (published by Vikas); others, better still, will soon appear in a book put together by Ashish and Shanti Chandola and T. N. A. Perumal.

Then again, Krishnan was a marvellous prose stylist in his adopted language, English. Growing up, I spent many enjoyable hours in his company, reading his fortnightly 'Country Notebook' column in *The Statesman*. Much later, I had the privilege of making a selection from essays he had published over fifty years. The standard of the writing was so consistently good, and the subjects treated so compellingly relevant, that the choice of what to leave out became almost more difficult than what to include. I finally winnowed fifteen hundred pieces down to sixty-eight; these published by Oxford University Press in 2000 under the title *Nature's Spokesman: M. Krishnan and Indian Wildlife*.

Lastly, Krishnan was a precocious environmentalist and conservationist. He knew and practiced 'environmental education' before that term had been coined or subject had been born. Consider thus his essay 'Nature Study', printed in *The Hindu* on 18 May 1947. 'The school approach to nature study', wrote this former school-teacher, 'is fundamentally unsound. It is based on the theory that one must proceed from elementary, understandable things. There is simplification and selection, and logical, reasoned steps guide the approach. But the fact is that nature is not simple, logical and reasoned—thank God that it is not. There is no need to fully understand anything in all its structure and complexity to be alive to its charm... What makes living things fascinating is their behavior, not their anatomy. Children in primary schools should get to know the common wild plants and birds of the locality; birds because they are so easily watched. They should learn, a little later perhaps, the stories of the domestic animals. They should be taken out to see nature for themselves, and be given pleasant books, with gay, colourful illustrations... Children love them, and will readily interest themselves in any text if it is free from morals and illustrated in colour.'

Krishnan continues that 'it is in high schools, however, that nature study can be made really interesting and worthwhile. Occupation and instruction, without dullness, can be provided by giving the students a plot of ground for growing things in—not a bed for the bean seed only, but a miniature market garden. I am convinced that if the school could go to the trouble, and trifling

expense, of maintaining a poultry-run, a goat-pen (not too near the miniature garden), a pigeon-loft ... [and] a middle-sized School Dog, the scholars would acquire virtues and knowledge that a whole board of teachers cannot help them to get. [R]egular nature study outings, supplemented with lessons in field identification and methods of observation, will help them to develop a keen, live interest in nature’.

Krishnan was an ecological patriot, who believed that the essence of Indian-ness lay in the species and habitats distinctive to the land. When, in the first flush of Independence, the nation was restless to build—to build dams, steel mills, atomic plants and the like—Krishnan warned (in an essay published in *The Hindu* in December 1958) that ‘we are a very ancient nation too, and there are vital matters in which we need to be conservative rather than constructive’. He complained that ‘particularly we are given to the introduction of exotic plants in our desire to beautify the countryside and make up by plantation for the annihilation of jungle and woodland that we have been responsible for during the past fifty years... No country in the world has a flora so rich in exotics as India’. He recommended that we cultivate ‘a narrow sort of patriotism in our floral preferences’. In other words, to be truly Indian, one must plant (and protect) Indian.

All his life, Krishnan underlined the connections between conservation and nation-hood. An essay of 1974, printed in the *Times of India Annual*, put it this way: ‘If we are wise, we can save India and her magnificent heritage of nature for the generations of Indians to come, and safeguard the physical and organic integrity of our country, threatened today—we can give them a country to be truly proud of. Will we?’ Twenty-two years later, in a column published in *The Statesman* on the day he died, Krishnan suggested that the snag ‘seems to lie in our Constitution, evolved by men with formidable knowledge of legal and political matters and hardly any of the unique biotic richness of India—they do not even seem to have realized that the identity of a country depended not so much on its mutable human culture as on its geomorphology, flora and fauna, its natural basis’.

In India, as elsewhere, wildlife conservation has chiefly operated by punitive methods: by the preservation, through policing, of wilderness areas from ‘the intended and unintended consequences of human actions’. But, as Krishnan suggested in an essay of 1955, one must look forward to the day when wildlife would be kept safe not from, but by humans. ‘No man truly interested in a country’s fauna’, he wrote, ‘will deny that the ideal is where there are no parks or preserves, but where the beasts and birds are ceded territory and unmolested by virtue of a highly informed national consciousness’.

Speaking strictly in career terms, Krishnan was conspicuously unlucky in the timing of his birth. For, in his day, there were no serious publishing houses active in India. If Krishnan were alive now, publishers small and large, desi and foreign, would be beating a path to his door, offering seductive advances to allow him to take an extended breather from the world of freelance journalism, thus to give them books based on his photographs, his essays, and his crusading

environmentalism. I have the honour of belonging to a most gifted generation of Indian writers, but I will say this: in terms of talent and originality M. Krishnan comfortably exceeded us all.

### **GANDHI THE JOURNALIST,**

A hundred years this week, a new weekly made its appearance in Johannesburg. Its *raison d'être*, as expressed in the inaugural issue, was that 'the Indian community in South Africa is a recognized factor in the body politic, and a newspaper, voicing its feelings, and specially devoted to its cause, would hardly be considered out of place; indeed, we think, it would supply a longfelt want'.

The journal was called *Indian Opinion*, and its prime mover was a thirty-three-year-old lawyer named Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The weekly aimed, in the first instance, to represent the grievances of South African Indians to the rulers: and especially to urge the removal of barriers to settlement and employment considered 'undeserved and unjust'. A second aim was to unite the diverse elements among the diaspora; as the journal wrote, 'we are not, and ought not to be, Tamils or Calcutta men, Mohamedans or Hindus, Brahmans or Banyas, but simply and solely British Indians, and as such we must sink or swim together'. To this end, *Indian Opinion* was published in as many as four languages: English, Hindi, Tamil, and Gujarati.

To make the white man sensitive to coloured needs and aspirations, and to unite the diaspora, were the two principal objectives. But there was also a third: to make Indians more sensitive to their own frailties. As a note in the first issue put it: 'We are far from assuming that the Indians here are free from all the faults that are ascribed to them. Wherever we find them to be at fault, we will unhesitatingly point it out and suggest means for their removal'. To turn the torch inwards was typical of Gandhi; as was the desire, also expressed in the first issue itself, to invite contributions from 'competent writers' of all races and nationalities.

The early years of *Indian Opinion* are the subject of a fascinating essay by the Cape Town-based historian Uma Mesthrie. She points out that Gandhi's journal was not in fact the first Indian newspaper in South Africa. That honour goes to the *Indian World*, a periodical started in 1898 by an expatriate from Madras named P. S. Aiyar. This paper soon folded up, but in 1901 Aiyar launched another called *Colonial Indian News*. However, he operated in the province of Natal, thus leaving the Transvaal, where Gandhi lived, open for a journal of its own.

Mesthrie also pays due attention to the men who helped Gandhi run *Indian Opinion* in its formative years. They included Madanjit Viyavaharik, a former Bombay schoolteacher who was the periodical's first proprietor and printer; and M. H. Nazar, originally from Surat, who was its first editor. Two Westerners played a critical role in its financing and production. These were Henry Polak and Albert West, both of whom, appropriately enough, Gandhi first met in a vegetarian restaurant. Also indispensable in the making of *Indian Opinion* was Gandhi's nephew

Chhaganlal, who was assigned a bania's duties of keeping the accounts and collecting the advertisements.

Some later historians of a Marxist bent have seen Indian Opinion as reflecting the class bias of the merchants who financed it. The journal did indeed take up questions of taxation and trade that affected the merchants. But it also vigorously polemicized on behalf of Indian indentured labourers. And on occasion it took up the cause of the Africans, writing of their dispossession by European farmers, and of the 'anomaly' whereby they could not get to represent themselves in Parliament.

Gandhi once said of Indian Opinion that 'week after week I poured out my soul in columns expounding my principles and practices of Satyagraha... The journal became for me a training in self-restraint, and for friends a medium through which to keep in touch with my thoughts'. After Gandhi's departure from South Africa in 1914, the journal carried on its fight on behalf of the Indian community. From 1918 to 1956 Indian Opinion was edited by his son Manilal Gandhi, whose own devotion to the task has been recorded by his daughter Ela: 'I recall my father wading through stacks of newspapers and [agency] reports selecting items for publication and writing suitable titles, [and] arranging the stories and writing the editorial in the early parts of the morning. It was his habit to rise at 2 a. m. and work until 5 a. m. Then he would go for a long walk passing through Ohlange and Shembe villages on his way home'.

So long as he was in South Africa, Indian Opinion was both a mirror to Gandhi's ideas and a voice for his movement. In his Autobiography, he claimed that 'satyagraha would probably have been impossible without Indian Opinion'. It was this belief that inspired him to begin a journal of his own in India. Thus in 1919 he started the weekly Young India, to promote his views on politics and religion and a hundred other topics besides. Fourteen years later the periodical changed its name, to Harijan, but its aims were unchanged: to serve as a vehicle for the thoughts and struggles of India's most influential man.

The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, that run to almost a hundred volumes, draw massively from his writings in the three journals he founded and edited. To dip into these volumes at random, or with focused intent, is to be acquainted not only with the originality of Gandhi the thinker, but also with the persuasiveness of Gandhi the writer. As Sunil Khilnani observes, like Jawaharlal Nehru Gandhi wrote English well enough to have made, if he had so wished, a living through journalism. One reason he wrote the foreign tongue as well as he did was that he 'ruthlessly excised' from his own work the exaggeration and melodrama so characteristic of Indian writing. Thus Gandhi's prose came to be marked, in Khilnani's words, by 'the clarity of its argumentation and the directness of its expression'.

No one knew Gandhi's prose style better than Krishnaswami Swaminathan. This Chief Editor of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi was himself a retired Professor of English Literature. Now in his school-leaving examination the young Mohandas had obtained a mere 44.5 % in

English. But residence in London, wide reading, and diligent practice made him a decent practitioner of written English by the time he had turned thirty. Reading and re-reading his vast output, Professor Swaminathan came to marvel at the transparent simplicity of his literary style. Gandhi's prose, remarked Swaminathan, 'is a natural expression of his democratic temper. There is no conscious ornamentation, no obtrusive trick of style calling attention to itself. The style is a blend of the modern manner of an individual sharing his ideas and experiences with his readers, and the impersonal manner of the Indian tradition in which the thought is more important than the person expounding it. The sense of equality with the common man is the mark of Gandhi's style and the burden of his teaching. To feel and appreciate this essence of Gandhi the man, in his writings and speeches, is the best education for true democracy'.

### **THE DARLING OF THE DISPOSSESSED,**

In April 1996, I joined a group of Indian scholars for a meeting in the southern town of Manipal in memory of Mahatma Gandhi. The inaugural address was by Shivarama Karanth, who spoke of his debates with the Mahatma some sixty years previously, on such varied subjects as sex and spirituality. Among the other speakers were the legendary actor and publisher K. V. Subanna, and the no less legendary novelist U. R. Anantha Murthy. Representing the younger generation was the critic and cultural theorist D. R. Nagaraj. Representing the non-Kannada world were the polemicist Claude Alvares and the sociologist J. P. S. Uberoi.

All these men—there was, I seem to remember, a conspicuous absence of women—spoke against a backdrop of a lifesize portrait of Gandhi, clad in the dhoti he wore for the last thirty-three years of his life. More than one speaker invoked the mode of dress as symbolizing the message of the Mahatma. Why did we all not follow his example, they said, and give up everything, to thus mingle more definitively with the masses?

I remember the Manipal meeting for many things. It was very likely the last public appearance of Shivarama Karanth. He died later that year as did, much before his time, D. R. Nagaraj, a man who, if he too had been granted ninety years on this earth, might very well have transformed the intellectual landscape of India. I remember the meeting also for the splendid dinner arranged one night by Anantha Murthy, at the Admar Mutt in Udipi. This was a repast of forty two courses, all vegetarian, cooked and served by pious but obviously unascetic Brahmins for an assorted crowd of lapsed Hindus, mleccchas, and meat-eaters.

But I remember the Manipal meeting most of all for a talk on the last day by the Mysore-based writer Devanur Mahadeva. Mahadeva began by reading out a short poem in Kannada, written not by him but by a Dalit woman of his acquaintance. The poem spoke reverentially of the great Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar (1889–1956), and, especially, of the dark blue suit that Ambedkar invariably wore in the last three decades of his life. Why did the Dalit lady focus on Ambedkar's suit, asked Mahadeva? Why, indeed, did the countless statues of Ambedkar put up in Dalit

hamlets always have him clad in suit and tie, he asked? Now if Gandhi wears a loin-cloth, said Mahadeva, we all marvel at his tyaga, his sacrifice. The scantiness of dress is, in this case, a marker of what the man had left behind. A high-caste, well-born, English-educated lawyer had voluntarily chosen to give up power and position and live the life of an Indian peasant. That is why we fondly remember that dhoti.

However, if Ambedkar had worn a dhoti, went on Mahadeva, that would not occasion wonder or surprise. He is a Dalit, we would say—what else should he wear? Millions of his caste fellows wear nothing else. It is the fact that he escaped their fate that is symbolized in that suit. By the canons of tradition and history this man was not supposed to wear a suit, blue or otherwise. That he did was a consequence of his extraordinary personal achievements: a law degree from Lincoln's Inn, a Ph D from America and another one from England, the drafting of the Constitution of India. By memorializing him in a suit, the Dalits were celebrating his successful storming of an upper caste citadel.

Today, B. R. Ambedkar is the only national, or at least pan-Indian, hero that we have. Patel is admired only in his native Gujarat, Bose hardly remembered except in his native Bengal. Azad is forgotten by Muslim and non-Muslim, Nehru villified by left and right. While Gandhi is still admired, and to an extent followed, by some brave social activists, in the wider popular consciousness he has no serious impact any more.

Ambedkar, however, is revered by Dalits in every corner of our land. His posthumous political importance is obvious to any observer of the Indian scene. But now, at last, we have a decent reason to appreciate his intellectual importance as well. This comes in the form of a large-sized volume of his 'Essential Writings', edited by Valerian Rodrigues, and released before the public not long before Ambedkar's death anniversary, which falls on the 6th of December (a date polluted in our minds by the fact that it was also on this day, thirty-six years later, that occurred the most disgraceful act committed collectively by Indians in free India).

Ambedkar is now chiefly remembered as a critic and opponent of caste system. The anthropologist Gerald Berreman once wrote that 'the history of every caste system, of every racially stratified system, of every instance of birth-ascribed oppression, is a history of striving, conflict, and occasional revolt'. Down the centuries, the resistance to caste has taken many forms. Within Hinduism, one must acknowledge the pioneering role of the Bhakti tradition, and of the non-Brahmin movement led by Jotirau Phule. Other religions of Indian origin which have (at least in theory) challenged caste were Buddhism and Sikhism. Islam and Christianity, when they came to India, also made important contributions to the weakening of caste. Then, moving into the twentieth century, we have the lifelong struggle against Untouchability of Mahatma Gandhi.

Without any disrespect to the trends and individuals singled out above, it is fair to say that in terms of ultimate impact the greatest of all opponents of caste has been B. R. Ambedkar. But, as



Valerian Rodrigues's volume reminds us, Ambedkar was a man of many parts: a lawyer, an economist, a constitutionalist, a religious and social theorist. The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar pays due attention to his writings on caste, but it also reserves ample space for his important work in the fields of public finance, nationalism, the Indian Constitution, and Buddhism. The book is enriched by a deeply informative yet studiously non-polemical introduction by the editor.

Rodrigues made his selection from the sixteen volumes of Ambedkar's writings and speeches, published some years ago by the Government of Maharashtra. That series was edited by the Dalit scholar and civil servant Vasant Moon. Moon died earlier this year, but not before the publication in English of his remarkable Marathi autobiography, *Growing Up Untouchable*, this translated by Gail Omvedt, and introduced by the doyenne of Dalit studies, the American historian Eleanor Zelliott. Also published recently is *India's Silent Revolution* by the French scholar Christophe Jaffrelot, a learned and sympathetic account of the rise of low caste political movements in northern India.

These three books are very welcome in themselves, but welcome too as an indirect and comprehensively effective answer to *Worshipping False Gods*, the motivated and dishonest book on Ambedkar and the Dalit movement published in 1997 by Arun Shourie. That work was a masterpiece of suppression and distortion. Fortunately, now no one need read it anymore. Instead read the works of Rodrigues, Moon, and Jaffrelot, and you will, I am certain, come to see why Ambedkar ranks with Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore as among the greatest Indians of modern times.

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Ambedkar is now chiefly remembered as a critic and opponent of caste system. The anthropologist Gerald Berreman once wrote that 'the history of every caste system, of every racially stratified system, of every instance of birth-ascribed oppression, is a history of striving, conflict, and occasional revolt'. Down the centuries, the resistance to caste has taken many forms. Within Hinduism, one must acknowledge the pioneering role of the Bhakti tradition, and of the non-Brahmin movement led by Jotirau Phule. Other religions of Indian origin which have (at least in theory) challenged caste were Buddhism and Sikhism. Islam and Christianity, when they came to India, also made important contributions to the weakening of caste. Then, moving into the twentieth century, we have the lifelong struggle against Untouchability of Mahatma Gandhi.

Without any disrespect to the trends and individuals singled out above, it is fair to say that in terms of ultimate impact the greatest of all opponents of caste has been B. R. Ambedkar. But, as Valerian Rodrigues's volume reminds us, Ambedkar was a man of many parts: a lawyer, an economist, a constitutionalist, a religious and social theorist. The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar pays due attention to his writings on caste, but it also reserves ample space for his important work in the fields of public finance, nationalism, the Indian Constitution, and Buddhism. The book is enriched by a deeply informative yet studiously non-polemical introduction by the editor.

Rodrigues made his selection from the sixteen volumes of Ambedkar's writings and speeches, published some years ago by the Government of Maharashtra. That series was edited by the Dalit scholar and civil servant Vasant Moon. Moon died earlier this year, but not before the publication in English of his remarkable Marathi autobiography, *Growing Up Untouchable*, this translated by Gail Omvedt, and introduced by the doyenne of Dalit studies, the American historian Eleanor Zelliot. Also published recently is *India's Silent Revolution* by the French scholar Christophe Jaffrelot, a learned and sympathetic account of the rise of low caste political movements in northern India.

These three books are very welcome in themselves, but welcome too as an indirect and comprehensively effective answer to *Worshipping False Gods*, the motivated and dishonest book on Ambedkar and the Dalit movement published in 1997 by Arun Shourie. That work was a masterpiece of suppression and distortion. Fortunately, now no one need read it anymore. Instead read the works of Rodrigues, Moon, and Jaffrelot, and you will, I am certain, come to see why Ambedkar ranks with Gandhi, Nehru and Tagore as among the greatest Indians of modern times.

The Hindu

08/12/2002

## NIRAD BABU'S NEHRU

On the 8th of September 1951, *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* was published in London. When the book finally arrived in India, several weeks later, the author sent a copy to his literary mentor, Mohitlal Majumdar. Majumdar soon wrote back with his words of appreciation, but then asked: 'What does Jawaharlal Nehru think of it?'

*The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* was met with considerable acclaim in the United Kingdom, but almost universally condemned in India. Swadeshi-minded reviewers saw it as a prejudiced look at Indian nationalism, as another drain inspector's report in the manner of Katherine Mayo's book of 1927, *Mother India*. Only in *The Statesman* did it get any praise: but then *The Statesman* was still an English-owned paper, and its reviewer was that discerning and literate expatriate Englishman, Verrier Elwin.

Now Jawaharlal Nehru was an Indian nationalist in politics and an English gentleman in his cultural make-up. What did he think of Nirad Chaudhuri's book? Alas, there is no sign that he ever read it. However, no sooner was the book published than Chaudhuri's bosses at All India Radio started waving the rule-book at him. By law, he was told, all government servants had to take official clearance before publishing a newspaper article, let alone a book. Owing to this transgression Chaudhuri did not get the extension for which he had been recommended. Then, after he had retired from All India Radio, an informal ban was placed on his talking on or writing scripts for the organization, in those days a valuable source of supplementary income for writers.

Then, and later, it was suggested that these acts of vengeance were wreaked by people anxious to please the Prime Minister. It was claimed that Nehru was jealous of the attention the book got in England, where it was praised almost as widely as his own autobiography, published fifteen years before. Where Nehru was a world statesman, the author of this new book was, in his own words, an 'unknown Indian'. But these suggestions, or innuendos, were rejected by Nirad Chaudhuri himself. In a later memoir, *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, Chaudhuri wrote that besides the officials in the Ministries, the Indian High Commissioner in the U. K., V. K. Krishna Menon, had 'strongly criticized' the *Autobiography* in public. And Menon was known to be a close friend of the Prime Minister. But Chaudhuri insisted that neither his views, nor any one else's, would have caused Nehru to wreak a petty act of revenge. As he put it, 'Jawaharlal Nehru was not the man to be roused to action over a book'.

We know not then what the greatest Indian of his time thought of Chaudhuri or his book. But the unknown Indian's views on Nehru are on record. *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* is peppered with comments on his person and his politics. Nirad babu admired Nehru for his unflinching and (in the Indian context) unfashionable hostility to Japanese militarism, and for being 'so sure of himself' that he could deal with all kinds of accusations 'in the most dignified manner'. He wrote with great acuity about Nehru's loneliness, about how 'throughout his life [he] never got rid of the sense of being alone, being only by himself.' There was something to emphasize with, but

also much to criticize. Nehru, said Chaudhuri, was ‘completely out of touch with the Indian life even of his time, except with the life of the self-segregating Anglicized set of upper India who lived in the so-called Civil Lines’. While he was ‘repelled’ by the ‘crude Hinduism of northern India’, Nehru had ‘no understanding whatever of even the highest forms of contemporary Hinduism as preached in Bengal and Maharashtra’. This man of the people, wrote Chaudhuri, was actually a snob, with an undisguised condescension ‘towards anyone who had the Hindi or Bengali accent in his English’, towards whom ‘he would always behave like an Englishman to a “native”’. Nehru was also said to be prone to giving ‘elegant verbal embodiments to [his] obsessions’ (a charge which, of course, can be laid at the door of Chaudhuri himself). To these comments one must add, the claim, expressed in *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, that ‘collectively, we shall never achieve anything like the greatness and individuality of the Hindu civilization’: a claim that seems almost a direct challenge to Nehru’s hopes for modern India.

Let me turn to a now forgotten essay on Nehru by Nirad Chaudhuri, published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in the second week of May 1953. The writer was (by this time) a moderately well known Indian, but his subject still towered over him, and everybody else. Nehru’s leadership, remarked Chaudhuri, ‘is the most important moral force behind the unity of India’. He was ‘the leader not of a party, but of the people of India taken collectively, the legitimate successor to Gandhiji’. However, if ‘Nehru goes out of politics or is overthrown, his leadership is likely to be split up into its components, and not pass over intact to another man. In other words, there cannot, properly speaking, be a successor to Nehru, but only successors to the different elements of his composite leadership’.

As Chaudhuri saw it, the Nehru of the 1950s helped harmonize the masses with the classes. ‘Nehru is keeping together the governmental machine and the people, and without this nexus India would probably have been deprived of stable government in these crucial times. He has not only ensured co-operation between the two, but most probably has also prevented actual conflicts, cultural, economic, and political. Not even Mahatmaji’s leadership, had it continued, would have been quite equal to them’.

‘If, within the country, Nehru is the indispensable link between the governing middle-classes and the sovereign people’, continued Chaudhuri, ‘he is no less the bond between India and the world’. He served as ‘India’s representative to the great Western democracies, and, I must add, their representative to India. The Western nations certainly look upon him as such and expect him to guarantee India’s support for them, which is why they are so upset when Nehru takes an anti-Western or neutral line. They feel they are being let down by one of themselves.’

Subsequent issues of the *Illustrated Weekly* carried many letters by readers, some appreciative of Chaudhuri’s essay, others less so. The more critical mails seemed to come from Bengal. S. M. Chakravarty of Calcutta complained that Chaudhuri had ‘painted Mr Nehru without the warts’—these being his tolerance of corruption and provincialism and his encouragement of personal favourites. Moni B. Majumdar, also from Calcutta, insisted that ‘the Nehru of the old days is

dead'. Where once he identified and mingled with the poor, now he moved around 'surrounded and protected by the police and the military', reminding one 'of the days when a British Viceroy travelled in India'. And K. C. Chatterjee, of Bankipore, rejected the argument that Nehru could have no successor. There were two worthy candidates in Bengal itself: B. C. Roy, who 'has shown a spirit of sacrifice in leaving his lucrative practice to lead the troubled and mutilated state of West Bengal', and the 'constructive' and eloquent leader of the parliamentary Opposition, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee.

Nirad babu was known to be a meticulous record-keeper, filing away all that he wrote and all that people wrote about him. I wonder whether, when he came to write *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!*, he consulted the file marked 'Writings and Correspondence for 1953'. Certainly, his retrospective assessment of 1987, by which time Nehru's reputation had dropped precipitously, is far more qualified than the one he offered while Nehru was alive. To celebrate Nehru when he was in his pomp and to have mixed feelings about him when he was in the doghouse—this somehow goes against the grain of the image that Chaudhuri cultivated about himself. The anomaly can be explained in one of two ways. A cynic would say that this writer who claimed to stand alone and apart was actually quite prepared to lose himself in the herd. More likely, to my mind, is that while the ambivalence of *Thy Hand, Great Anarch!* reflected Chaudhuri's real feelings towards Nehru, the gushing admiration of his Weekly essay stemmed from a desire to spite and provoke the Bengali *bhadralok*, known to detest Nehru (and Gandhi) for depriving their province of the moral and political leadership of free India.

### VAJPAYEE'S NEHRU

In the spring of 1977, thirty years of Congress rule ended, and a new Government took power in New Delhi. Politicians who had expected to live out their days in the Opposition were unexpectedly thrust into Ministerial office. In preparation, sycophantic bureaucrats began to take away or hide any visible signs in the secretariat of the party, and family, that had for so long governed India. One member of the Janata Government was quick to notice this not-so-subtle spring cleaning. He was the External Affairs Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee. When he first entered his new office, Mr Vajpayee looked around the walls, and immediately identified a blank spot. 'This is where Panditji's portrait used to be', he told his Secretary: 'I remember it from my earlier visits to the room. Where has it gone? I want it back'.

'Panditji' was Jawaharlal Nehru, a politician the new Foreign Minister had reason to dislike. The organization in which Mr Vajpayee was reared, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, detested Nehru. They suspected his culture, distrusted his politics, and opposed his economics. For the R. S. S. Nehru was an Anglicized Indian out of touch with the realities of the motherland, a pseudo-secularist who was soft on the minorities, and a weak-kneed administrator who 'gave up' half of

Kashmir. To cap it all, in matters of economics he took his cues from that godless dystopia, the Soviet Union.

All this Mr Vajpayee had imbibed with his mother's milk, so to speak. But more recently, the two years before he became Foreign Minister had been spent in a jail where he was placed by Jawaharlal Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi. He had, in sum, compelling ideological and personal reasons to reject Nehru and his legacy. And yet, he asked for his photograph to be reinstated in his office. It was a gesture that would not have come easily to some of his fellow pracharaks—to L. K. Advani, for instance. Mr Vajpayee is a softer man, and he must have been embarrassed by this brutal casting into the dustbin of one who was India's longest serving Foreign Minister—Nehru held that office for seventeen years, for as long as he was Prime Minister—as well as its most effective and charismatic. Despite all that he had learnt in his shaka, once he became Foreign Minister Mr Vajpayee would have wished to claim this part of his predecessor's legacy, thus to once more make India an articulate and influential voice in world affairs.

The story of Mr Vajpayee's entry into South Block in April 1977 was told to me by a now retired member of the Indian Foreign Service. To this anecdotal evidence of our current Prime Minister's admiration of the first person to hold the office, let me now offer the authoritative proof of print. Published in the proceedings of the Indian Parliament for the year 1964 is a speech delivered by Atal Behari Vajpayee after the death of Nehru. It is an extraordinary tribute, whose full import and flavour is properly conveyed only in its original Hindi. Still, as I hope to show, it is moving enough in translation.

In the third week of May, 1964, Vajpayee and Nehru had clashed in Parliament. The Prime Minister had released Sheikh Abdullah from detention, and even sent him to Pakistan to negotiate a settlement with Field Marshal Ayub Khan. The Jana Sangh naturally opposed any such talks with the enemy. They had always rejected the 'two-nation theory', but, said Mr Vajpayee to Mr Nehru, the Sheikh's release and recent utterances had given voice to the still more pernicious 'three-nation theory', whereby Kashmir would have some kind of autonomous or (God forbid) even independent status.

While Sheikh Abdullah was in Pakistan Nehru died. The Sheikh received the news while addressing a press conference in the capital of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, Muzaffarabad. The Lion of Kashmir, reported one newspaper, 'broke into tears and sobbed... He could not speak for a few minutes. In a muffled voice, he said, "he is dead. I can't meet him"'. Abdullah returned to Delhi, and from Palam headed straight to Teen Murti House. Here 'Sheikh Abdullah cried like a child and the wreath nearly fell from his hands when he saw the body of Mr Nehru.'

We do not know of Atal Behari Vajpayee's first reactions to Nehru's death. However, speaking in Parliament some days later, he said that with the Prime Minister's passing 'a dream has remained half-fulfilled, a song has become silent, and a flame has banished into the Unknown.

The dream was of a world free of fear and hunger; the song a great epic resonant with the spirit of the Gita and as fragrant as a rose, the flame a candle which burnt all night long, showing us the way'. The loss, said Vajpayee, was not that of a family or community or party. Mother India was in mourning because 'her beloved Prince has gone to sleep'. Humanity was sad because its servant and 'worshipper has left it for ever'. The 'benefactor of the downtrodden has gone'. The 'chief actor of the world stage has departed after performing his last act'.

Mr Vajpayee went on to compare Jawaharlal Nehru to the most hallowed of all Indian heroes. In 'Panditji's life', he said, 'we get a glimpse of the noble sentiments to be found in the saga of Valmiki'. For, like Ram, Nehru was 'the orchestrator of the impossible and inconceivable'. He too 'was not afraid of compromise but would never compromise under duress'. In remembering the deceased Prime Minister, Mr Vajpayee celebrated the human being whom 'no one can replace'. That 'strength of personality', he remarked, 'that vibrance and independence of mind, that quality of being able to befriend the opponent and enemy, that gentlemanliness, that greatness—this will not perhaps be found in the future'.

But Mr Vajpayee also saluted the statesman. With the foundations of the Republic built by Nehru now in question, he said, it was time to rededicate ourselves to his, and its, ideals. 'With unity, discipline and self-confidence we must make this Republic of ours flourish. The leader has gone, but the followers remain. The sun has set, yet by the shadow of stars we must find our way. These are testing times, but we must dedicate ourselves to his great aim, so that India can become strong, capable and prosperous...'. Above all, were India to 'establish lasting peace in the world, we shall succeed in paying proper homage to him'.

I am fairly sure that Mr Vajpayee will never read this column, but let's hope some of his admirers and followers will. They shall probably be embarrassed by it. I myself think that the speech whose translated excerpts I have reproduced here was a rather fine one. It was beautifully worded. It displayed the ability to 'befriend the opponent and enemy' for which Mr Vajpayee singled out Mr Nehru. It was warm and heartfelt and humane—in a word, gentlemanly. Judging by this speech, and by other evidence that has come to us over the years, it seems clear that in some obvious ways—such as the courtesy towards his peers and adversaries—the young Jana Sanghi consciously modelled himself on his older Congress counterpart. The personal influence is manifest but of any political influence there is, alas, not a trace.



## CULTURE

### A Year A Londoner

On the last day of June, I went to the nearest branch of the NatWest Bank and paid the sum of 43 pounds and ninety-four pence, this being the money I owed to the Westminster City Council. With that act I formally ended a year as a bona fide, tax paying, resident of the most interesting city in the world.

New Yorkers may contest this judgement, but despite the many attractions of the Big Apple London still holds the edge. For one thing, the architecture is more appealing. The buildings are elegant, and on the human scale. They speak to you in a way that skyscrapers cannot. The city's crescents and squares lend it an eccentric charm that the straightforward grid of Manhattan does not contain. And there are many more parks in London, as well as water bodies of various shapes and sizes.

London is also, in social terms, at once more diverse and more integrated than New York. On its streets and subways, Arabic and Hindi jostle with English and French (and, increasingly, Polish). New York, by contrast, is essentially monolingual. (To be sure, first generation immigrants speak their language at home, but on the street at least it is mostly all English). At the same time, in London blacks and whites and coloureds are less rigidly separated by social class or place of residence. As a result, there are more mixed groups in the parks and restaurants of London than in the parks and restaurants of Manhattan.

I would have enjoyed my year as a Londoner in any case, but I enjoyed it more because of where I lived. I had rented an apartment in Maida Vale, a leafy neighbourhood that is a short walk from Lord's, the loveliest of cricket grounds, and a slightly longer walk from Regent's Park. In my native Bangalore the footpaths have long since been claimed by cars. Unable to walk on the roads any more, I am forced to exercise on the treadmill. On the other hand, on every clear day this past year I would walk past Lord's to Regent's Park, take three or four rounds of the lake before walking home by another (and equally attractive) route. The exercise took a hour, the pleasure made purer by the Hindustani classical music that I listened to on my iPod.

I was fortunate in where I lived, and luckier still in where I worked. I was teaching at the London School of Economics (LSE), an institution which in terms of antiquity and academic prestige is ranked slightly below Oxford, Cambridge, and the great American universities of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, Stanford, and MIT.

The LSE has, however, one inestimable advantage over those other places of learning—it is located in a city in the centre of the universe, and thus regularly visited by scholars from Asia and Africa, North and South America, and of course Continental Europe. Its location and its

attractions mean that a Mozambiquan historian wishing to travel to Brazil is very likely to route his journey via London. So too the Indian sociologist travelling to San Francisco or the American political scientist studying the Congo.

Making use of this strategic location, the LSE showcases a more impressive series of public talks than any other institution in the world. Harvard or Columbia might have specialists from other universities coming in for departmental seminars, and occasional public lectures for a wider audience. But the LSE has, during term time, as many as four different public lectures every day. The student, professor and alert private citizen are all spoilt for choice. Thus, on the same evening, one might have Paul Krugman speaking in the Sheikh Zayed Theatre, the lawyer who attended on Nelson Mandela speaking in the Old Theatre, and an expert on Egypt speaking at the Hong Kong Theatre.

Living as I do in Bangalore, a placid, even-tempered city not known for the vigour of its intellectual life, I took full advantage of my temporary good fortune. I heard more good talks in a year than I would in my home town in a decade, perhaps several decades. I listened to (and was educated by) several superb lectures on the Arab Spring, attended an excellent panel on Latin American politics, and heard a learned (and witty) disquisition on the relative merits of the economic theories of Friedrich Hayek and John Maynard Keynes.

London is an international city which has also long been an Indian city. The first desis who passed through or lived in London—in the 17th and 18th centuries—were sailors, sepoys and domestic servants. They were followed by Maharajas and nawabs, and, from the 19th century, by students and professionals.

To the historian of modern India, London carries a special significance, for it bears the imprint of the remarkable Indians who passed through its streets and houses. Rammohan Roy and Rabindranath Tagore spent extended periods in the city. The Grand Old Man of Indian Nationalism, Dadabhai Naoroji, lived here for several decades, in which time he served a term as the Member of Parliament from the London locality of Finsbury.

The London School of Economics, where I taught, is the alma mater of, among other people, V. K. Krishna Menon, K. R. Narayanan, and B. R. Ambedkar. Just north of the LSE is Holborn, which once had a vegetarian restaurant which a young M. K. Gandhi regularly patronized. Just south-east of the LSE is the Inner Temple, where Gandhi articulated to become a lawyer. Gandhi returned to the city he had known as a student in 1906, 1909, and 1914, travelling each time from South Africa. He came back one last time in 1931, to plead the case for Indian independence.

On each of these visits, Gandhi spent several months in London. He walked a great deal, and talked a lot too. He was deeply attached to the city, and had many friends in it. During the Second World War, even as he prepared to launch a final ‘Quit India’ campaign against the British, he wept at the prospect of Westminster Abbey and the House of Parliament being damaged or destroyed by Hitler’s Luftwaffe.

My office at the LSE was in Columbia House, which is on the north side of the curving road known as the Aldwych. Across the road was India House, the office of our High Commission in the United Kingdom. This past Republic Day, 26th January, I had to meet a friend for lunch at the India Club, a place allegedly founded by Krishna Menon and where he certainly spent much time during the 1930s and 1940s. To get to the Club I had to walk past India House, where a small group of elderly, bearded demonstrators were shouting slogans such as ‘Who is the greatest terrorist? India!’; ‘Indian Occupying Forces—Leave Kashmir!’.

As I walked past the diasporic nationalists, I saw a young man taking photographs, these no doubt to be uploaded on the Net or conveyed to the press. I ducked past the protesters, and turned into the narrow lane that was to take me to my destination. Here I passed a bust of Jawaharlal Nehru, recently re-erected after it had been damaged by a band of Sri Lankan Tamils protesting India’s role in their homeland. It was altogether a very London experience, made more curious (and poignant) by the fact that Nehru, whose statue dominated one side of the temporarily besieged Indian Embassy, was of Kashmiri origin himself.

(published in The Telegraph, 28th July 2012)

### **Smash-And-Grab Crony League**

I live in Bangalore, down the road from the Karnataka State Cricket Association. I am a member of the KSCA, which means that I can watch all the matches played in its stadium for free, and from a comfortable seat next to the pavilion. I exercise the privilege always during a Test match, often during a one-day international, and sometimes during a Ranji Trophy match. However, I have not yet watched an IPL game played at the KSCA, nor do I intend to in the future.

My original reasons for boycotting the Indian Premier League were aesthetic. 20-20 lacks the subtlety of the longer form; no one can build an innings, no one bowl a probing spell. I didn’t much care either for the way the game was packaged, while the man who owned the local Bangalore team was—as seen by someone whose day job is studying the legacy of Ambedkar, Gandhi, Nehru—somewhat on the loud side.

The sting operation involving some (fringe) IPL players and the fight between Shah Rukh Khan and the Mumbai Cricket Association both seem to confirm these aesthetic reservations. But in fact the problem with the IPL goes far beyond petty corruption and boorish celebrities. The Indian Premier League is not just bad for me, but bad for Indian capitalism, bad for Indian democracy, and bad for Indian cricket.

Let me defend these claims. When the Indian economy was liberalized, in 1991, it unleashed the long-suppressed energies of the entrepreneurial class. Sectors such as software and

pharmaceuticals, that depended chiefly on innovation and knowledge, prospered. This was capitalism at its most creative; generating incomes and jobs, satisfying consumer tastes, and also spawning a new wave of philanthropy.

More recently, however, some less appealing sides of capitalism have manifested themselves. The state retains control of three key resources—land, minerals, and the airwaves. These resources have become enormously valuable with the expansion of the economy, prompting sweetheart deals between individual politicians and individual entrepreneurs, whereby land, minerals, or spectrum are transferred at much less than market cost, and for a (quite large) consideration. Creative capitalism has increasingly given way to crony capitalism, with dire consequences for society, for the environment, and for public institutions. Hence the 2G scandal, the spike in the Maoist insurgency due to the dispossession of tribals by mining companies, the killings of whistle-blowers by the land mafia, etc.

The Indian Premier League is decidedly on the crony rather than creative side of the ledger. The original auction for teams was shrouded in secrecy—the allocations were not made on the basis of bids transparently offered and assessed. Player prices do not accurately reflect cricketing worth either. Thus foreign players are paid a fraction of what Indian players of comparable quality are paid.

The most egregious form of cronyism, however, is the ownership of an IPL team by the current President (and former Secretary) of the Board of Control for Cricket in India. It is as if Alex Ferguson was simultaneously manager of Manchester United and the President of the British Football Association. Tragically, the cronyism runs down the line. The current Chairman of Selectors is the brand ambassador of the team owned and run by the Board President. The famous former cricketers who cover Indian cricket on television have been consultants to the IPL. Other commentators have accepted assignments from IPL teams. To put it bluntly, their silence on this (and some other matters) has been bought.

The IPL has given capitalism and entrepreneurship a bad game. But it has also been bad for Indian democracy, in that it has vividly and even brazenly underlined the distance between the affluent urban middle classes and the rest of India. Consider the fact that no city in India's largest state, Uttar Pradesh, which has an excellent Ranji Trophy team, was awarded a franchise. Nor any city in Bihar, Orissa, or Madhya Pradesh either. To leave out four of India's largest states—all cricket-mad, and which collectively account for close to half the country's population—must seriously disqualify the League's claim to be 'Indian'.

Yet it can still be called 'Premier', for it speaks for the more prosperous parts of India, and for the more prosperous sections within them. The very names of the teams are a clue to its elitist character—two 'Kings', two 'Royals', and one 'Knight', this in a democratic Republic whose Constitution and laws (rightly) did away with aristocratic titles of any kind.

The IPL is explicitly biased against the poorer states of the Union, and implicitly biased towards what, in marketing argot, is referred to as ‘S(ocio)E(conomic)C(lass)-1’. Maharashtra has two IPL teams, based in its largest and richest cities, yet it is the upper strata of Pune and Mumbai society that most closely follow these teams. Some watch the matches at home, over a drink and after a hard day at the office; others go to the stadium, seeking vicariously to soak in the glamour of those even richer than themselves. That is to say, they go not so much to see Virat Kohli or Sachin Tendulkar bat, but to be in the same privileged space as the Nita Ambanis and the Shahrukh Khans, this fleeting proximity reassurance that they too are within that part of India which is Shining as well as Winning.

The middle classes of the major metros are large and prosperous enough to sustain the IPL. But the rest of India, that is to say, the majority of India, does not appear to connect with the tournament. When there is a match on at the KSCA, there are crowds in the ground and in pubs in central Bangalore, but no interest in the poorer parts of the city or in villages ten or twenty miles away.

On the other hand, when the national team plays, as India, the peasant and the slum dweller can follow its fortunes as keenly as the hedge fund manager and software engineer. The IPL is exclusive; the Indian team inclusive. Notably, they do not live in separate worlds; rather, they are connected, with the former having a decided impact on the latter. Had the Indian cricket team six weeks off after the 2011 World Cup, they may not have lost four-nil to England in that summer’s Test series. Two of India’s leading batsmen and its leading bowler were carrying injuries sustained by playing in the IPL, which was held immediately after the World Cup. The weariness and the exhaustion carried over into the Australian series, likewise lost four-zero, and into successive one-day tournaments, where the World Cup champions were humiliated by such sides as Bangladesh. The ordinary cricket lover now knew what our ‘professional’ cricket commentators were too nervous or too polite to say—that too much cricket, and too much of the wrong kind of cricket, was a major reason behind the disgraceful performance of the Indian team in the latter half of 2011.

English and Australian cricket administrators may have other (and less salutary) reasons to dislike the IPL—namely, that it has shifted the balance of power in world cricket away from the white countries to India. However, some former colonial countries should be less than pleased with the tournament as well. Thus, the international game would benefit hugely if the West Indies were to somehow rediscover the art of winning Test and one-day matches. Recently, the West Indies have fought hard in series against Australia and England; their pluck might have been rewarded with victory had they the services of their best bowler, Sunil Narine; their best batsman, Chris Gayle; and their best all-rounder, Dwayne Bravo—all, alas, choosing to play in the IPL instead of for their national side.

There is a larger, cosmopolitan, reason to dislike the IPL; and also a local, patriotic, one. The baleful effects of the tournament should worry Indians liberals who admire that form of

capitalism which rewards those with the best ideas rather than those with the best contacts; Indian democrats who wish to nurture a more caring and just society; and Indian cricket fans who want their team to perform honorably at home and abroad.

(published in The Hindu, 26th May 2012)

### **Dravid The Man**

A year ago, while recovering from an asthmatic attack, I found some profound consolation in the morning's newspaper, whose front page carried a photo of a tall, slim, handsome young man in conversation with a short, plump, middle-aged man of undistinguished appearance. The asymmetry, striking at first glance, was complicated, if not overthrown, by a closer scrutiny of the photograph. For the expression on the young man's face combined respect with reverence, affection with adoration. In material terms, the lad was looking down—by a foot, at least. However, in emotional terms, he was looking up, and up, and up.

The two men were Rahul Dravid and G. R. Viswanath. Vishy was my boyhood hero—because he batted like a dream, because he was a gentle, good man, because he came from my home state of Karnataka, because he was the first Test cricketer I ever shook hands with. I adored him as a fan; but here, apparently, was a man who had scored twice as many Test runs as Vishy who felt the same way towards him.

What had brought the two cricketers together was the naming of an underpass after the little fellow, with the honours being done by the bigger chap. Later that day—when the steroids had suppressed the asthma altogether—I wrote to Dravid, with whom I have a slight acquaintance. His reply confirmed in words what that look had conveyed in essence. 'I remember as a young kid', he wrote, 'rushing to watch Vishy play in a Ranji game against Hyderabad (towards the end of his career)—there must have been easily 20,000 people at the ground that day. Sadly those days are long gone.'

I was reminded of that photograph (and that exchange) when reading a tribute by Greg Chappell to Rahul Dravid on his retirement from international cricket. This recalled the 2006 tour to the West Indies, when, with the Australian as manager, India won its first series outside the sub-continent in twenty years. Chappell singled out the contributions of Dravid and Anil Kumble in particular. As he remarked: 'No team has had two more dogged, resilient and proud competitors; and, for them, the team always came first. There must be something in the water of Bangalore!'

There must be, indeed. Before Dravid there was G. R. Viswanath; and before Kumble there was Bhagwat Chandrasekhar. As a partisan—a notorious partisan—of Karnataka, I have been blessed in having watched and followed the first duo, and then the second. As a young boy, I knew Vishy to be the best Indian batsman who was not from Bombay, and Chandra to be the finest

Indian wrist-spinner with the exception only of Subhas Gupte. These were men from my home town who won (and saved) Test matches for my country. But it was not for their playing skills alone that I warmed to them. For, as their team-mates and opponents would both have confirmed, Vishy and Chandra were quite simply the nicest cricketers of their generation.

In middle-age, I came to admire Dravid and Kumble as much as I had once venerated their forbears. The one, the best Indian batsman ever, Sachin Tendulkar only excepted; the other, without question the best Indian bowler ever. That, like the other two, these lads came from Bangalore gave my admiration a special resonance. More unexpectedly, it helped me in concrete, career, terms. About ten years, I had to undergo a searching public examination, in effect the most difficult test of my life. The night before, I had a dream; in it, a leg-break from Anil Kumble caught the edge of Alec Stewart's bat and was taken low down at slip by Rahul Dravid. The auguries were splendid—the next day, relaxed and reassured by the dream, I passed the examination.

As with Vishy and Chandra, it is as much for their character as their cricketing abilities that we admire Dravid and Kumble. To be sure, our appreciation of character has changed with the times. The words that came to mind with regard to Vishy and Chandra were 'charming', 'decent', and, at a pinch, even 'laid-back'. With Dravid and Kumble, the adjectives one reaches for rather are 'courageous' and 'committed', close synonyms of the words preferred by Greg Chappell himself.

These shades of difference reflect the changing sociology of the city. The Bangalore that Vishy and Chandra played for was that of the Mavalli Tiffin Rooms and the unencroached-upon Cubbon Park, a town of tiled bungalows and green barbets calling. M. G. Road then had more cinema houses than it had cars. The Bangalore that Dravid and Kumble have played in was that of Epsilon and Infosys, of glass and concrete and no birds at all, of buses and Jaguars and motorbikes all piled up in horrendous traffic jams.

When Vishy and Chandra first made their debuts, Karnataka was called Mysore; and it played its games at Central College, with trees ringing the ground and spectators in makeshift wooden stands. On the other hand, the venue Dravid and Kumble called 'home', the Chinnawamy Stadium, was built for eternity. Seating 60,000, it was floodlit, and ringed by armed security guards.

Playing mostly club and Ranji cricket, with a Test series every other year, Vishy indulged his fondness for beer, and Chandra allowed himself to make more zeroes than any other Test cricketer. On the other hand, playing all day, all year, the naturally unathletic Dravid willed himself to take more catches than any other Test player in history; a record that has perhaps got less notice in the flurry of tributes that accompanied his retirement (which understandably focused on his many remarkable innings, at home and, especially, abroad).

The photograph that once consoled a wheezing, ageing, Indian was proof that Rahul Dravid is altogether as nice a man as G. R. Viswanath. Vishy could behave on the cricket field as he did in a coffee shop in Basavangudi—that is to say, with an easy, unselfconscious informality. However, in a harder, harsher, world, Dravid has had to develop skills that Vishy could do without. For, the fans are now more numerous, as well as more demanding. Their attentions are unceasing and at times unforgiving. For its part, the Indian Cricket Board, once run by egotistic and self-important amateurs, is now controlled by professional crooks. To these demands are added those of the commercial sponsors whom the successful modern cricketer has also to please.

These multiple pressures have compelled Dravid to craft a public persona that radiates balance and self-control. He must be decent and honourable; and he is, always. But he can never be spontaneous. There was a gaiety to Vishy's bearing; there is a gravity to Dravid's conduct. That is why we remember the one as 'the best-loved' cricketer of his day; the other rather as the 'most greatly admired' cricketer of his.

It may be that Rahul Dravid naturally has more steel in his backbone than G. R. Viswanath; or it may be that the times demands it. A last vignette reveals what he does and does not share with the little fellow who was both his hero and mine. While watching a series of one-day matches on television, I noticed that the Indian captain was fielding at mid off rather than slip. I at once wrote him a letter which began as follows:

'Dear Rahul,

You are quite possibly the finest Test batsman in Indian cricket history, and without question the finest slip fielder ever produced by India in ALL forms of the game. You must field there. I understand that with your somewhat erratic bowling you feel the need to be close at hand to guide them. But, all things considered. I think that slip is the place for you, and for the team. No one else in India is remotely as good as you, which is why all these catches go down in the early overs.'

Two or three days later a reply came back. This did not refer to my request, but instead noted that he had bought a book I had recently published. 'You are right', remarked the Indian cricket captain, that 'all our history seemed to stop with Gandhi and there's actually so much that's happened since for us to be where we are 60 years later. I finished about 180 pages so a fair way to go. Would love to talk about it and much more.'

My email was unsolicited, unprompted, even impertinent—akin in cricketing terms to a bouncer from a bowler of military medium pace, it was dispatched to the boundary with a flick of the wrists. The put-down was decisive; and yet so delicately worded. I was told, in the kindest possible manner, to shut up about strategy in cricket and go back to writing history books. And so I have. (published in The Telegraph, 24th March 2012)



## **Moodbidri Tales**

Although I am not especially religious, I enjoy visiting old temples, for the beauty of their construction and the tranquillity of their surroundings . I live in Bangalore, a city whose colonial architecture is sparse and whose modern buildings are horrendously ugly. When friends come visiting, I take them on a day-trip either to Somanathapura, an exquisite Hoysala temple off the road to Mysore, or Lepakshi, just across the border into Andhra Pradesh, whose stone cobra is one of the jewels of Indian sculpture.

These two temples I still love, but to them has now been added the Chandranatha Temple in the southwestern town of Moodbidri . I first heard of the town when I met Padmanabha Jaini, whose books on Jain philosophy and morality are enduring works of scholarship. Professor Jaini is the most reticent of men, but when a mutual friend told me that he came originally from Moodbidri I decided I must visit the place. When I went there I was enchanted. There were Jain havelis built in the coastal style, with tiled roofs and spacious balconies, and doors and windows of solid, solid, wood. There was a Jain high school, and a Jain dharamshala. And there were several small Jain temples, their traditional architecture largely intact.

I walked around the town, and then walked into the Jain Mutt. Here I was introduced to the keeper of Moodbidri's flame, a young acharya in his late thirties named Charukeerthi Swami. I watched, and listened, as he spoke to a stream of devotees, who included local Jains as well as some pilgrims from Rajasthan, who had travelled across India to see the 'Jain Kashi'. The swami struck me as a man of considerable intelligence, whose Hindi and English was as fluent as his Kannada, and who was deeply sensible of the depth and sophistication of the spiritual tradition that he now represented. I could not help contrasting his dignity and composure with the vanity and self-regard of the postmodern gurus who appear on television.

After the devotees had departed the swami asked where I was from. On learning that I was a historian, he said I must see the Chandranatha or 'thousand pillar' temple, and pointed me in its direction. It lay at the end of the road on which the Mutt was sited, its beauty and capaciousness masked by the wall that enclosed it.

At the entrance to the temple is a stone column some fifty feet high. The temple behind has three long hallways. The building is held up by gorgeous carved pillars. It is surrounded by grass on all sides, and beyond, by a high wall that has weathered several hundred monsoons and seems set to see out several hundred more. From the compound's edges one get an quite lovely perspective on the temple as a whole.

One thing that struck me about the temple were its long, sloping roofs. On returning home, I consulted Percy Brown's classic Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu Periods), where it is argued that the pillars, columns, hallways and roofs all closely resemble temples in Nepal and Kashmir, with the difference that the materials used here was stone rather than wood. Brown thinks that the parallels are not accidental; as he puts it, 'in the case of these Mudabidri temples

some of the similarity to the Himalayan style may be accounted for by the builders in each region endeavouring in their construction to solve problems presented by the extreme changes of climate, in mitigating the effect of the fierce tropical sun alternating with heavy monsoon rains. Yet it is difficult to believe that the analogy between the two styles of building and methods of construction is due to both people reasoning alike.’

Brown writes of the carvings in the Chandranatha temple that they are ‘all executed with incredible precision, patience, and skill.’ So they are. Their beauty is enhanced by the immediate setting, of grass and trees within a stone wall, and of the wider context, namely, of a town that nobly carries forth an ancient spiritual (and architectural) tradition.

That tradition may now be under threat. When I revisited Moodbidri recently, I headed straight for the Mutt to meet Charukeerthi Swami. He said a seminar on the heritage of the town was due to start in half an hour. After a quick round of the temple I went to attend its proceedings. Apparently a four lane highway was being planned, that would cut right through the town. The swami, and, following him, other speakers, spoke of how the road, if built, would damage the town’s integrity and sanctity. One speaker sarcastically remarked that had this been a temple town close to Delhi, the proposal would have been shelved at the first protest, whereas voices from so far South rarely reached the nation’s capital.

At this seminar I met Dr M. Prabhakara Joshy, a respected educationist and writer, who explained to me how Moodbidri might be saved. First, re-activate an alternate proposal to build a bypass that would rejoin the main road two miles from the town, thus keeping heavy traffic away from it. Second, declare Moodbidri and its precincts a ‘heritage town’, with strict rules regulating the nature of new constructions. Unlike some other temple towns, Moodbidri largely retains its integrity—its shrines have not been refashioned as mock-Tirupathis, and the town centre still has few large buildings. There is a lot to save, and, therefore, also a lot to lose. With this column perhaps the voices of the citizens of Moodbidri might finally reach New Delhi. One hopes, and trusts, that they are heard.

(published in the Hindustan Times, 2nd March 2012)

### **Three Epiphanies,**

Although I live in Bangalore, I am the most technologically challenged person on earth. I can—just about—change a light bulb, but I cannot operate an oven or microwave without burning or blowing up something. For my ineptitude I am a continuous source of merriment to my (in this respect) more talented wife and children. Fortunately, they are also indulgent—coming to my aid when, for example, a file containing a manuscript has to be transferred from hard disc onto CD.

Among the artifacts of modernity that I find impossible to operate is a camera. This is a lack I feel most keenly, for in everyday life in Bangalore, and while travelling to other parts of India, I often come across scenes and juxtapositions that capture, in striking visual form, the antinomies of a land that (as the writer U. R. Anantha Murty once remarked) lives simultaneously in the 12th and 21st century—as well as in all centuries in-between.

I wish I had a camera with me when, some years ago, I drove from Shimla to the valley in which I was born and raised, Dehradun. As a boy, I had sometimes gone on family picnics to the gurudwara in Paonta Sahib, on the banks of the Yamuna. To get there we went westwards from Dehradun town, driving (and even, on one occasion, cycling) the thirty miles to the shrine through paddy fields and sal forests.

This time I was coming from the west, driving east. I left Shimla after breakfast, and after stopping en route at a dhaba outside Nahan, reached the gurudwara in the early afternoon. I walked around the halls and down to the river, and then up again to the car, living anew the memories and friendships of an almost idyllic boyhood.

We left the gurudwara, into the narrow streets abutting it, before finding our way out to the highway that links Himachal Pradesh with Uttarakhand. Soon we were on a new bridge, built across the river that divided the two states. On this bridge we passed a Nihang Sikh. In past times he would have been riding a horse; here, in the mundane present, he was on a bicycle. He looked splendid nevertheless; dressed in the glorious blue robes of his sect, a high and stylishly pointed turban on his head and a kirpan by his waist. The setting sun glinted off his sword and onto his face, which was already shining with religious devotion (and perhaps something more).

As we left the bridge I turned to take a last look. There he was, cycling stiff-legged, now left alone on the road, the river beneath him and the Himalayan foothills beyond. Would that I had a camera with me, and known how to operate it; that image of the Sikh coming into my valley would have served for ever as the screen saver on the computer on which I write.

A year after I left the Sikh on the bridge, I was in Patna. A friend who had grown up there took me on a tour of the city: the Golaghar, the Gandhi Maidan, Jayaprakash Narayan's home in Kadam Kuan, the Patna College. As we broke for lunch she ran into a colleague. When we described what we had seen, he enquired in courteous puzzlement: 'Aap Gangaji nahin dekhe kya?'

After the meal we set out to repair the omission. My friend thought a good view of the river was to be had from what once used to be the palace of the Maharaja of Darbhanga. So we walked past the university, and into a side street that would take us to our destination. I was struck, en route, by what I saw on the boundary wall of the palace. God knows what the wall looked like when the Maharaja lived there; now, it was covered with dungcakes, and with posters advertising coaching classes for admission to engineering colleges—these running side by side. There was a pattern, of columns of dungcakes alternating with columns of posters, that spoke of a friendly co-

operation between those who kept the buffaloes that supplied milk to the city's residents, and those who ran the classes by which Bihari boys, and, increasingly, girls, wished to leave behind their traditional callings and become part of a modern, globalized, economy.

A sturdy Nihang on a smart new bridge bore testimony to U. R. Anantha Murthy's claim that Indians, unlike Europeans or Americans, live as much in the past as in the present. But the wall in Patna took in the future as well—built in the 19th century, it now advertised 21st century occupations alongside patterns of resource use that had endured across millennia.

That drive across the Yamuna, and the walk to the Ganga, were both conducted in daylight. On another occasion, I was driving home around ten p.m., when due to an accident the traffic was diverted through a road that passed through the Halasuru Market, one of the oldest settlements in the Bangalore Cantonment. A landmark on this street is a small, tasteful, Wesleyan Church, built in the early 19th century. The church was closed and shrouded in darkness, but the shop opposite was open and brightly lit. I turned to take a look. Piled high on a long low table were hundreds of undergarments in various shades of pink. These were divided into segments, priced at five, ten, and fifteen rupees respectively.

This shop normally sold what are called 'export rejects'. But these were something else. I was in a hurry to get home, so did not stop to enquire, but my guess is that the pink chaddis had been acquired from a certain Pramod Muttalik, who a few months previously, had received an estimated eighteen thousand undergarments by post and courier, these sent by the democratically minded citizens of Bangalore.

Readers will recall that Mr Muttalik and his Sri Ram Sene had attacked young women in various towns in Karnataka. They now threatened to attack young couples anywhere who dared to be seen together in public, despite not having been married according to Brahminical rites. The threat provoked widespread revulsion, and an inspired protest, whereby a group of Bangalorians sent Mr Muttalik all those pink chaddis by post. Now the chaddis had been 'remaindered', for—one presumes—a consideration.

Had I been more technologically adept, I could have captured those three moments—the Nihang Sikh on the bridge across the Yamuna, the wall in Patna poised between past and future, the pink panties on sale opposite an old church in Bangalore—captured them in pictures, in a form far finer, and more enduring, than this hesitant essay in words. There have been other occasions when I wished I had the skill or courage to operate a camera and take photographs. I excuse my inadequacies on the grounds that I started writing and travelling in a pre-digital age, when the use of a camera required some amount of physical dexterity. My daughter tells me that the models now on sale are comprehensively idiot-proof. There may still be time to get her to show me how to use—or abuse—one.

## THE SARDAR OF SPIN

In the third week of August, I got a call from a friend in Delhi, the great slow bowler Bishan Singh Bedi. ‘Everyone around me is shouting Anna Hazare! Anna Hazare!’, he said: ‘A few months the same people were shouting IPL! IPL’. ‘Instead of a Jan Lokpal Bill’, remarked Bedi, ‘what Parliament should have passed is an Anti Herd Instinct Bill.’

This may have been the most insightful remark I read or heard on the whole tamasha at the Ramlila Maidan. It was certainly the wittiest. And it was entirely in character. As player and captain, as coach or commentator, and, not least, as a plain old citizen of the Indian Republic, Bishan Bedi has long been known for his robust independence of mind. His opinions are sometimes foolish, at other times farsighted—and at all times, his own.

I first met Bishan Bedi in 1974, when I was just out of school and he was at the height of his cricketing renown. He had come for dinner to my uncle’s house in Bangalore, where he polished off a bottle of whisky. The next morning, he ran through a very strong Karnataka side. Later that year I joined St. Stephen’s College in Delhi. In a city crowded (even then) with Very Important People, Bedi was a presence. He was the captain of the Delhi Ranji Trophy team, and soon to be captain of India. He dressed colourfully, bowled beautifully—and spoke his mind. In those pre-liberalization days, his glamour was enhanced by the fact that he was only one of two Indians in the capital to own and drive a Volkswagen Beetle (the other was Professor Mrinal Datta Chaudhuri of the Delhi School of Economics).

In my years as a student in Delhi, I was too shy to approach Bedi in person. But I went often to the Ferozeshah Kotla to watch him play. And I soaked in stories told me by colleagues in college who played under him for the Delhi Ranji Trophy team. There was the tale of the tall, brawny fast bowler who admired his muscles and invited his team-mates to do likewise. When the braggart dropped an easy catch in practice, Bedi told him to carry a brick in each hand and run around the ground holding them above his head. Halfway, the giant fell to the ground, screaming (if you run for ten yards with the same burden you will know why). Then there was the story of the young batsman in search of his maiden first-class hundred. At close of play on the first day of a Ranji match he had reached 50 not out. At drinks the next day he had advanced to 75. Bedi sent a message asking him to accelerate, and another message half an hour later to the same effect. The young man crawled on, playing for himself rather than the team. At lunch he had reached 99 not out, whereupon Bedi declared the innings closed.

The character and cricketing genius of Bishan Bedi are nicely captured in a new biography by the Bangalore-based writer Suresh Menon. *Bishan: Portrait of a Cricketer* is a fine book: rich, detailed, affectionate, yet not uncritical. Menon speaks movingly of Bedi’s generosity to young cricketers. The former India captain regularly takes youngsters on educative tours of England, raising funds and arranging matches for them himself. Each time Menon himself visited his subject, he met cricketers from the mofussil staying at Bedi’s home.

This nobility of spirit manifested itself early. An old teacher of Bedi's told Menon that as a schoolboy he was often seen wheeling around a disabled classmate. 'Former players have reduced "giving back to the game" to a cliché', writes Menon: 'Bedi has rescued the cliché and restored it to its original import.'

The first Test Bedi watched was the one he made his debut in. A story in this book speaks of how spoiled today's cricketers are, in comparison with the cricketers of the past. In the winter of 1975-6, Bedi played an unofficial Test for India against Sri Lanka in Nagpur. He then had to proceed to Chandigarh to play a Duleep Trophy match. The Board of Control for Cricket in India forgot to book his ticket, so Bedi travelled unreserved in the luggage rack of a third-class compartment. So parsimonious were cricket administrators back then that they paid cricketers Rs 250 per Test match. When Bedi and company won a Test match against New Zealand inside of four days, the Board paid them fifty rupees less!

If Indian cricketers are compensated far better now, it is due to the struggles on their behalf by men like Bishan Bedi. In his book, Menon documents his role in organizing a players' association, that demanded and got fair compensation for cricketers active as well as retired. Bedi was able to do this in part because of the force of his personality, and in part because he was one of the true greats of the game. I did not realize until I read this book that Bedi was the only cricketer who played in India's first Test victories in New Zealand (Dunedin, 1968), the West Indies (Port of Spain, 1971), England (The Oval, 1971), and Australia (Melbourne, 1978).

Suresh Menon begins his book with this sentence: "I hear you are writing a biography of Bishan Bedi. Have you heard of the time when..." and the speaker would launch into a story that might verge on the edge of authenticity or topple over into the realm of the incredible.' I shall end this column with two stories that are authentic because I can bear witness to them.

Some years ago, the former British Prime Minister, John Major, made a private visit to New Delhi. His host threw a party, choosing the guests with some care and attention. In deference to the visitor's political distinction he invited a senior Union Minister and the serving Chief Election Commissioner. To indulge the visitor's passion for cricket he had called two former Test players. Through a long evening John Major ignored the other guests entirely. He focused on Bishan Bedi, with whom he swapped a series of cricketing stories. Several involved Fred Trueman, whom Sir John venerated and Bedi had played against. At the evening's end, I got in my sole sentence, when I told the chief guest that I hoped he would write a fan's book with many stories about 'F. S. T.' (Frederic Seward Trueman). 'Why only F. S. T', replied Sir John, 'I shall tell stories too about B. S. B.'

The other tale is, I think, more telling still. I had been in Kabul, where our mission expressed its interest in inviting a famous Indian cricketer to inspire, and coach, young Afghans. I suggested that since players still active would not risk a trip to a land subject to regular terror attacks, they ask a retired player to come. Various names were discussed, one of whom was Bishan Bedi's.

When I returned to India I called my hero-turned-friend. I asked him if the invitation came through at a convenient time, whether he would be willing to go. ‘Why not’, answered the Sardar of Spin spontaneously, ‘anywhere for cricket’. Anywhere for cricket—whereas the unspoken motto of some of his former team-mates is, anywhere (and anything) for money.

(published in The Telegraph, 22/10/2011)

## **DREAM TEAMS**

With the forthcoming World Cup in mind, I sat down with the journalist and cricket nut Rajdeep Sardesai to choose an all-time Indian One-Day Eleven. We excluded from our consideration those players whose careers had ended before India began playing this form of cricket at the international level. With this restriction, we arrived at the following team, in batting order: 1. Saurav Ganguly 2. Sachin Tendulkar 3. Virendra Sehwag 4. Mohammed Azharuddin 5. Yuvraj Singh 6. Mahendra Singh Dhoni 7. Kapil Dev 8. Harbhajan Singh 9. Anil Kumble 10. Javagal Srinath 11. Zaheer Khan.

No one will question the inclusion of Tendulkar, Ganguly, Kapil, Kumble, and Dhoni. However, nostalgia for the 1983 World Cup victory might lead to claims being advanced on behalf of the strokemaker Krishnamachari Srikkanth, and the seam-bowling all-rounders Mohinder Amarnath and Roger Binny. Those who remember our more emphatic win in the 1985 World Championship of Cricket (played in Australia) would press the names of two of that tournament’s heroes, Ravi Shastri and Laxman Sivaramakrishnan. A case can also be made for Rahul Dravid to replace Azhar, and for Manoj Prabhakar to be chosen instead of Srinath.

Choosing mythical elevens is always contentious, but let me say no more about this team and instead go about picking an eleven composed of those Indians whose own careers ended before the era of one-day internationals. For earlier generations had also produced attacking batsmen, wicket-taking or restrictive bowlers, and fine fieldsmen. What then might a Dream Team of Golden Oldies look like?

The first name I shall pencil in is that of Syed Mushtaq Ali, who was as inventive and effective a strokemaker as Virendra Sehwag, as useful a change bowler, and incomparably the better fielder. His partner at the top of the order shall be Budhi Kunderan, who likewise scored at the rate of knots (ask the England bowlers of the 1960s), and would in this team handily keep wickets too. At one drop, we have Mansur Ali Khan Pataudi, who had the misfortune to lose one eye in a car accident shortly after he began his first-class career. With two good eyes he might have matched Bradman, but even with the handicap he remained a fine forcing batsman, and a brilliant outfielder. At the pivotal position of number four we have Polly Umrigar, who like other Bombay batsmen before and after, could play in different gears, consolidating the innings or

dominating the bowling as the situation demanded. Polly was another outstanding fieldsman, and a decent off-spinner as well.

Number five would be C. K. Nayudu, who was without question the most charismatic cricketer ever to wear Indian colours. C. K. could clear the boundary as easily as Yuvraj Singh, and he had a far wider range of strokes, among them the leg glide and the late cut. While principally a batsman, Nayudu took many wickets with his off-cutters, and, in the field, was not known ever to let down other bowlers. At six would come the peerless Vinoo Mankad. In his pomp, Mankad was the finest spin bowler in international cricket, and also good enough with the bat to score two Test double hundreds and share, with Pankaj Roy, the world record for an opening partnership.

Four, five and six are all variously gifted, and so too the three who shall follow them. At seven we have Lala Amarnath, an attacking batsman, restrictive medium-pace bowler, and, also, a Test-quality wicket-keeper (a skill that may come in handy if Kunderan has an off day, as he sometimes did). At eight is the tall left-handed all-rounder R. G. (Bapu) Nadkarni, a Test centurion like six of the seven batsmen who preceded him, and, more importantly, the most miserly of bowlers, who once sent down twenty-seven (yes, twenty-seven) successive maiden overs against an England side. At nine would come L. Amar Singh, who was, so to say, the Kapil Dev of his day as a hitter of fours and sixes, a decent fielder, and, above all, a magnificent swing bowler.

Ten and jack are bowlers pure and simple. These are the superb legbreak-and-googly bowler Subhas Gupte, and the speedster Mohammed Nissar, who probably bowled faster than any other Indian and was known for an especially deadly yorker.

This eleven, like the more contemporary team which we chose before it, would also be open to (some) criticism. The all-rounders Salim Durrani and Dattu Phadkar would have their supporters, as also the batsman Vijay Hazare. Mumbaikars might argue for the inclusion of N. S. Tamhane, perhaps the finest wicket-keeper India has produced, and whose case here is made stronger by the fact that he knew the wares of Gupte and Mankad especially well.

If the eleven outlined at the beginning of this column was a Dream Team, in so far as they actually never played together in real time, this one might be considered a Fantasy Eleven, since none of its members in fact played formal or official one-day cricket. Who would captain this side? The eleven picked by Rajdeep Sardesai and myself had six former captains. We eliminated Tendulkar and Azhar on the grounds that they were poor tacticians, and the other three because they had the burdens of being the side's wicket-keeper (Dhoni), leading pace bowler (Kapil), and main spinner (Kumble) respectively. So we picked Ganguly as captain, a choice which, we thought, would please the cricket-loving people of Bengal while embarrassing the cricket-illiterate promoters of the Kolkata Knight Riders.



The choice here is easier to make. Mankad, Umrigar, Amarnath, and Pataudi, former India captains all, would voluntarily waive their claims in favour of C. K. Nayudu, India's first captain, who shall lead this team with character and with authority.

We now have two elevens, and hence, a match. Here is how they line up:

#### ONE-DAY INDIAN DREAM TEAM ONE-DAY INDIAN FANTASY ELEVEN

1. Saurav Ganguly 1. S. Mushtaq Ali
2. Sachin Tendulkar 2. Budhi Kunderan
3. Virendra Sehwag 3. M. A. K. Pataudi
4. Mohammed Azharuddin 4. Polly Umrigar
5. Yuvraj Singh 5. C. K. Nayudu
6. Mahendra Singh Dhoni 6. Vinoo Mankad
7. Kapil Dev 7. Lala Amarnath
8. Harbhajan Singh 8. R. G. Nadkarni
9. Anil Kumble 9. L. Amar Singh
10. Javagal Srinath 10. Subhas Gupte
11. Zaheer Khan 11. Mohammed Nissar

Were I a betting man, I would place my money on the latter eleven, speaking not as a historian prone to nostalgia but as a hard-headed student of cricket. The fielding is much better—contrast the lumbering legs of Dada, Sachin, Viru, Bhajji, Jumbo, Sri and Zak with the lithe athleticism of Mushtaq, Polly, C. K., Tiger, Amar Singh and company. The bowling is also immeasurably superior—if the new ball pairs are evenly matched, give me Gupte, Mankad and Nadkarni over Kumble and Harbhajan any day. Our oldies also have the edge in change or relief bowlers, for Nayudu, Polly and Mushtaq were real, wicket-taking bowlers, not hopeful trundlers of the Yuvraj or Saurav kind.

As for the batting, the first three of the moderns are clearly superior, but the middle order of the oldies seems more solid and convincing. At any rate, if Nissar yorks Ganguly (as well he might) and Gupte does Sehwag in the flight (as he so easily could) the moderns would be on the back foot in the first power play itself. Sachin would bravely carry on, but, frustrated by the superb fielding of Tiger and co., and the tardy progress of his partners, hole out in the middle orders to Mankad or Nadkarni. The tail might crawl their way to 200, a target comfortably within reach of

a side where Umrigar bats at four, Mankad at six, and Amar Singh at nine. ( The Telegraph, 25/2/2011)

## THE COLOSSUS

As you come out of the Doe Library of the University of California at Berkeley, and turn right, the road slopes downwards and continues until the west edge of the campus. Beyond, the San Francisco bay is, on a clear day, quite visible. It is an arresting view, best experienced in the early afternoon, when, if you exit the library precisely at the hour or half hour, you hear the university's campanile pealing behind you, feel the row of stately trees alongside you, and see, in the far distance, the waters of the Pacific gleaming silver in the setting sun.

One afternoon in 1997 or 1998 I came out of the library after a satisfactory day's work. The campanile was silent, but then I heard a sound more surprising as well as more arresting—the baritone of a beloved singer whose voice I recognized but did not expect, at that time or place, to hear. I followed the sounds to its source. A pick-up truck was parked at the side of the road, with a driver in overalls at the wheel. Seeing my look of wonderment, he pointed at his cassette recorder in explanation of his state of pleasure, which was also mine. He then said, 'Bhimsen Joshshii!' I nodded and looked rightwards; the bay had never seemed more beautiful before, or since.

When I was a student in Delhi in the 1970s, those who loved cricket were consumed by two debates—whether G. R. Viswanath was, under all conditions, a better batsman than Sunil Gavaskar, and whether for the sake of his better fielding and batting skills, Srinivas Venkatraghavan should be chosen for the Indian Test side ahead of his fellow off-spinner Erapalli Prasanna. The latter were the conventional or popular choices; the former offered by those who considered themselves more discerning, above the instincts of the herd. Those who listened to classical music were likewise consumed by two controversies—whether Vilayat Khan was a more variously gifted sitar player than Ravi Shankar, and whether the sweetness of his voice and the subtlety of his interpretations made Mallikarjun Mansur a greater singer than Bhimsen Joshi. Here too, the popular vote was generally for the second of the two musicians in these pairings, whereas those who fancied themselves as more learned (but who in fact may merely have been more pretentious) leant towards the first named.

I vigorously participated in these debates, but the sides I took (or the names I preferred) are irrelevant. In retrospect, what must be stressed instead is our staggering good fortune. We, who grew up in the 1970s, were exceptionally blessed to watch Gavaskar and Vishy bat, Venkat and Prasanna (and Chandrasekhar and Bedi bowl), Ravi Shankar and Vilayat (and Ali Akbar Khan and Nikhil Banerjee) play their respective instruments, and Mallikarjun and Bhimsen (and Kumar Gandharva and Kishori Amonkar) sing.

My own love of these cricketers and musicians combined a serious interest with a keen sense of proprietorship. After all, Vishy, Prasanna and Chandra lived in my home town, Bangalore, whereas Bhimsen, Mallikarjun and Kumar Gandharva originally belonged to my home state, Karnataka. They all came from towns or villages within a hundred mile radius of Dharwad, as did another trinity of magnificent vocalists—Gangubai Hangal, Basavaraj Rajguru, and Putturaj Gavai. The last named was the least known outside the state but venerated within it, both for his teaching skills and for having risen above the handicap of being born blind.

How and why Dharwad became a nucleus of shastriya sangeet awaits explanation. It was part of the Bombay Presidency, and thus subject to influences from those two great musical centres, Pune and Mumbai. Even closer were the towns of Kolhapur and Miraj, where some famous (Muslim) teachers of music had settled, at the invitation of princes who were patrons of culture. Since Dharwad falls broadly in the region known as ‘South’ India, perhaps these vocalists also drew to some extent on the Carnatic style of music. We do know for certain that they were deeply influenced by folk traditions and by medieval saints. Both Bhimsen and Mallikarjun liked to sing songs composed by Purandaradasa, whereas Kumar Gandharva re-interpreted Kabir with great feeling and sensitivity for a 20th century audience.

When I visited Dharwad some years ago, I was too shy to make contact with M. Venkatesh Kumar, who is now the best known, certainly the most gifted, and (although it pains me to say this) just possibly the last representative of the Dharwad tradition. (Readers of this column may associate me with certitude, even arrogance, but when it comes to meeting with or speaking to classical musicians I am timid beyond words, for I know them to be immeasurably greater than even the best writer can ever be. Some years ago, I stood next to the contemporary singer I most admire, Ulhas Kashalkar, at the check-in counter of the India International Centre in New Delhi. I was struck silent, when I should really have (a) obtained his autograph; (b) at least told him how much I admired his music.)

I would not meet Venkatesh Kumar, but, when in Dharwad, I did ask a friend to direct me to a store which stocked musical CD’s made by local, less known, companies. The store lay in a narrow street in an old, old market; its owner told me that it was a long time since someone had come looking for classical rather than film music. As a result his holdings in that direction were now depleted, but I did yet find two treasures, a selection of the songs of Putturaj Gavai, and a recording dating to the 1960s of Bhimsen Joshi singing Yaman.

Bhimsen’s obituarists will no doubt stress the sheer power of his voice. The adjectives ‘majestic’ and ‘imperial’ shall surely be used. This power and range were best expressed in raags such as Shankara, Durga and Maru Bihag. The Yaman I bought in Dharwad, on the other hand, reflected a reflective, ruminative quality that he also possessed, even if it was less on display in his later years. The subtlety of his musical understanding and the surprising tenderness of his voice are also manifest in some quite lovely recordings of Chhaya-Chhaya Malhar, Maluha Kedar, and Yamani Bilawal, the last being among my all-time favourite pieces of music.

Born and raised in north Karnataka, of properly Kannadiga stock, Bhimsen Joshi spent the last decades of his life in Pune, where he spoke Marathi to his friends and often sang the abhangs of the poet-saints of medieval Maharashtra. His true ethnic or provincial provenance thus became a matter of controversy. He is claimed as Maharashtrian by Bal Thackeray (and by better people too), whereas chaps like me insisted that he belonged instead to the state of Vishy, Pras, Chandra, Mallikarjun, Gangubai, and Putturaj Gavai. The dispute is perhaps petty and immaterial. For my fellow Bhimsen rasika in Berkeley, that red-bearded driver of a U-Haul truck, had never been to India in his life. Cricketers and writers are known by decades and claimed by countries, but musicians of genius belong to the ages, and to the world.

(published in The Telegraph, 29/1/2011)

### **THE AESTHETIC CASE FOR VEGETARIANISM**

The finest meal I have had was in the Admaru Mutt, a home for priests connected to the famous old Krishna temple in Udupi. The year was 1994; and I had come to the neighbouring town of Manipal to attend a seminar on the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 125th birth anniversary. The seminar was organized by the Kannada writer U. R. Ananthamurthy, and it was at his initiative that the participants were taken to the Mutt for lunch.

Manipal, and Udupi, lie in-between the sea and the Western Ghats. The terrain is staggeringly diverse, and the plant life too. Over the centuries, humans have taken advantage of nature's bounty to nurture a suitably varied cuisine. The wild mango found in the Ghats lends itself to a fabulous pickle. Another aachar special to the area is made from bamboo shoots. The rainfall is heavy enough to favour the jackfruit, an item rare elsewhere in India, here eaten in the form of salted chips or a spiced curry. All other vegetables known to humans are grown here as well. So are a great number of pulses. These are eaten with a soft and aromatic rice, made from a salt-resistant variety of paddy raised in fields close to the sea. Meanwhile, the district's cattle range freely in the forest; their milk, and its derivatives, therefore have a freshness and sweetness missing in more arid or more contaminated environments.

In theory, every resident of the Udupi district can take advantage of this natural and cultivated diversity. In practice, it is only the priests who have the time, and the leisure, to make the most skillful use of their surroundings. Sustained, in every sense, by those who labour on field and office, they accord equal importance to the satisfaction of the palate and to the study of the scriptures.

For Ananthamurthy's guests, the Admaru Mutt had prepared their 'special' lunch, which had as many as forty-two items listed on the menu. We squatted on the floor, a banana leaf in front of us, as the younger priests brought them to us one by one. On my left sat a Bengali scholar to whom a meal without any meat was an eccentricity reserved for unfortunate widows. On my

right was a Sikh sociologist, in whose carnivorous culture what we were being served was known dismissively as ‘ghaas-phus’—grass and such-like rubbish. By the end of the meal they were as satisfied as I.

I was reminded of that meal in Udupi while reading a recent issue of the New Yorker, where an American critic had reviewed *Eating People*, a polemic by Jonathan Safran Foer against the ways in which animals are reared, slaughtered and eaten in the United States. The reviewer noted that the book ‘closes with a turkeyless Thanksgiving. As a holiday, it doesn’t sound like a lot of fun. But this is Foer’s point. We are, we suggests, defined not just by what we do; we are defined by what we are willing to do without. Vegetarianism requires the renunciation of real and irreplaceable pleasures. To Foer’s credit, he is not embarrassed to ask this of us.’

Pity poor Foer, for whom—as for very many other Westerners repelled by the barbaric treatment of farm animals—vegetarianism is wholly or perhaps one should say merely a matter of moral choice. One reason I had enjoyed the feast in the Admaru Matt so much was that I had just spent a year in Germany, where to be a vegetarian meant being served boiled cabbage for lunch and baked potatoes for dinner. In Spain and Scandinavia my fate might have been even worse. Despite the fables about French cooking, the only country in Europe that can turn out a decent vegetarian meal is Italy—but how long can one live on pasta and pizza?

Ironically, it is even more difficult to be a vegetarian in Pakistan. As is well known, in recent decades the state and its ruling elite have increasingly abandoned the syncretic culture of South Asia in favour of the monochromatic monotheism of West Asia. In the desert, there is a limited number of plants that can be grown; these, besides, are needed to feed the goats and camels on which the humans in turn are sustained. The eating habits of West and Central Asians are ferociously carnivorous, and in coming closer to these places politically, the Pakistanis have also intensified their scorn for vegetarians, whom they were in any case inclined to look upon as effeminate and unmartial.

The homeland of Jonathan Safran Foer is somewhat better served in this respect. Once a country of immigrants from Europe and Africa, the United States has, in recent decades, seen millions of Asians move to its shores. The Midwest and the South are still heavily meat-centric, but in the cities of the east and west coasts a vegetarian has the choice of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Nepali, and Indian restaurants.

In these places the vegetarian can survive, after a fashion. This is not to say that what, outside India, are called ‘Indian restaurants’ do anything like justice to the multiple cuisines of the sub-continent. What one gets here is standard North Indian fare—a black or yellow daal, with random dishes mixing paneer with a limited number of vegetables (chiefly peas, potato, and cauliflower). Speaking as a South Indian, I should state that in my extensive travels in Europe and North America, I have never ever smelt or seen the Andhra pesarattu, the sanas of the west coast of Karnataka, the appam of Kerala, or the puliyodarai of Tamil Nadu, or, indeed, their

accompanying chutneys and curries. However, I am not a Southern chauvinist, and enjoy a Gujarati thali, which I can get in Ahmedabad or Mumbai, but not—or at least not yet—in New York or London.

The art and skill involved in Indian cooking is hard to explain to a foreigner. It uses a greater variety of grains, vegetables and spices, and a greater variety of techniques as well. The most celebrated European chefs know only to bake and grill, but Indians have for centuries soaked, ground, fermented, steamed, fried as well as baked and grilled ingredients and dishes. The flavours themselves range from the soft and delicate to the aromatic and spicy. It may only be in the quality of their desserts that European chefs exceed their Indian counterparts.

Like the finest art and the finest music, the finest food has its genesis in hierarchical and class-ridden societies. However, in the year 2010, one does not have to be a Mughal Emperor to admire the Taj Mahal, or a rich landlord to appreciate the khayals and thumris once performed by courtesans for their master. Likewise, the great and unsurpassed glories of Indian vegetarian cooking are now available to us all.

Back in the 1990s, I used to make a living as an intellectual migrant worker, teaching for a term every other year in an American university. I stopped doing this in part because I wanted to travel more within India, and in part because I missed the vegetarian cuisines of my homeland. In school and college, I ate meat, but gave up the habit in my thirties. I found that eating too much chicken and mutton coarsened the tongue, limiting the pure pleasure one otherwise got from eating sanas, or appam, or puliyodarai, or dhokla, or thepla, and whatever else is served with them.

For the typical American, Spaniard, Nigerian, and Pakistani, the embrace of a vegetarian diet is equated to joylessness. Here, one might choose to stop eating animals, if one is compelled to do so on ethical grounds. In fact, the aesthetic reasons for becoming a vegetarian are even stronger. I have spoken already of the beauties of South Indian and Gujarati cooking, but one of the best meals I have had was in the home of a historian in Assam. For here, like the Western Ghats, the fabulous diversity of the landscape sustains a comparable diversity of cultivated and cooked plants.

Contrary to Jonathan Safran Foer and his reviewers, being a vegetarian is really a lot of fun. One merely has to choose the right place to become (or be born as) one.

(published in The Telegraph, 20/11/2010)

## **Indians Great Greater Greatest?**

Nations need heroes, but the construction of a national pantheon is rarely straightforward or uncontested. Consider the debate in the United States about which faces should adorn the national currency. The founding figures of American Independence—Jefferson, Washington, Hamilton, Madison, and Franklin—are all represented on the dollar bill, albeit on different denominations. So are the 19th century Presidents Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Ulysses S. Grant.

In recent years, right-wing Americans have campaigned for their hero, Ronald Reagan, to be represented on the national currency. This, it is said, is necessary to bring it in line with contemporary sentiments. Of 20th century Presidents, Franklin Delano Roosevelt is represented on the dime, and John F. Kennedy on the dollar. Both were Democrats. Republicans now demand that the pantheon feature one of their ilk. In 2010, a Congressman from North Carolina, Patrick McHenry, canvassed for a law mandating that Ulysses S. Grant be replaced on the fifty dollar bill by Ronald Reagan. ‘Every generation needs its own heroes’, said McHenry. The American hero he was anointing for our times was Reagan, ‘a modern day statesman, whose presidency transformed our nation’s political and economic thinking’.

Turn now to that other large, complex, cacophonous, democracy—our own. After India became independent, the national pantheon offered to its citizens was massively dominated by leaders of the Congress Party. Mahatma Gandhi was positioned first, with Jawaharlal Nehru only a short distance behind. Both had played important roles in the freeing of the country from colonial rule. Both were truly great Indians. That said, the popular perception of both was helped by the fact that the party to which they belonged was in power for the crucial decades after Independence. Newspapers, the radio, and school textbooks all played their role in the construction of a narrative in which Gandhi was the Father of the Nation and Nehru its Guide and Mentor in the first, formative years of the Republic’s existence.

Until the 1960s, the dominance of Nehru and Gandhi in the national imagination was colossal. When, in that decade, the American scholar Eleanor Zelliot wrote a brilliant dissertation on B. R. Ambedkar and the Mahar movement in Maharashtra, she was unable to find a publisher. But then the Congress started to lose power in the States. In 1977 it lost power for the first time in the Centre. The rise of new political parties led naturally to revisionist interpretations of the past. New heroes began to be offered for inclusion in the nation’s pantheon, their virtues extolled (and sometimes magnified) in print, in Parliament, and, in time, in school textbooks as well.

The Indian who, in subsequent decades, has benefited most from this revaluation is B. R. Ambedkar. A scholar, legal expert, institution builder and agitator, Ambedkar played a heroic (the word is inescapable) role in bringing the problems of the Untouchable castes to wider attention. He forced Gandhi to take a more serious, focused, interest in the plight of the

depressed classes, and himself started schools, colleges and a political party to advance their interests.

Ambedkar died in December 1956, a political failure. The party he founded scarcely made a dent in Congress hegemony, and he was unable to win a Lok Sabha seat himself. But his memory was revived in the 1970s and beyond. His works began to be read more widely. He was the central, sometimes sole, inspiration for a new generation of Dalit activists and scholars. Obscure at the time of his death in 1956, condescended to by the academic community until the 1980s (at least), Ambedkar is today the only genuinely all-India political figure, worshipped in Dalit homes across the land. Notably, he is not a Dalit hero alone, his achievements recognized among large sections of the Indian middle class. No one now seeking to write a book on Ambedkar would have a problem finding a publisher.

The (belated) incorporation of Ambedkar into the national pantheon is a consequence largely of the political rise of the subaltern classes. Meanwhile, the pantheon has been expanded from the right by the inclusion of Vallabhbhai Patel. Paradoxically, while Patel was himself a lifelong Congressman, the case for his greatness has been made most vigorously by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). BJP leaders and ideologues speak of Patel as the Other, in all respects, of Jawaharlal Nehru. They claim that if Patel had become Prime Minister, Kashmir would have been fully integrated into India. Under Patel the country would have followed a more pragmatic (i.e. market-oriented) economic policy, while standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Western democracies against Godless Communism. Nor, if Patel had been in charge, would there have been (it is claimed) any appeasement of the minorities.

The BJP reading of history is tendentious, not least because Patel and Nehru were, in practice, collaborators and colleagues rather than rivals or adversaries. To be sure, they had their disagreements, but, to their everlasting credit, they submerged these differences in the greater task of national consolidation. Theirs was a willed, deliberate, division of labour and responsibilities. Nehru knew that Patel, and not he, had the patience and acumen to supervise the integration of the princely states and build up administrative capacity. On the other side, as Rajmohan Gandhi demonstrates in his biography of Patel, the man had no intention or desire to become Prime Minister. For Patel knew that only Nehru had the character and personality to take the Congress credo to women, minorities, and the South, and to represent India to the world.

That the BJP has to make the case for Patel is a consequence of the Congress's capture by a single family determined to inflate its own contributions to the nation's past, present, and future. Sonia Gandhi's Congress Party recognizes that a pantheon cannot consist of only two names; however, in their bid to make it more capacious, Congressmen place Indira and Rajiv alongside Nehru and Mahatma Gandhi. Thus the ubiquitous and apparently never-ending naming of sarkari schemes, airports, buildings, and stadia, after the one or the other.



The preceding discussion makes clear that political parties and social movements play a crucial role in how the national past is conveyed to citizens in the present. Indians admired by parties and movements, such as Ambedkar and Patel, have had their achievements more widely recognized than might otherwise have been the case. By the same token, great Indians whose lives are incapable of capture by special interests or sects have suffered from the enormous condescension of posterity.

Consider, in this regard, the current invisibility from the national discourse of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. Married to a man chosen by her family, she was widowed early, and then married a left-wing actor from another part of India. She joined the freedom movement, persuading Gandhi to allow women to court arrest during the Salt March and after.

After coming out of jail, Kamaladevi became active in trade union work, and travelled to the United States, where she explained the relevance of civil disobedience to black activists (her turn in the South is compellingly described in Nico Slate's recent book *Colored Cosmopolitanism*). After independence and Partition, Kamaladevi supervised the resettlement of refugees; still later, she set up an all-India network of artisanal co-operatives, and established a national crafts museum as well as a national academy for music and dance.

Tragically, because her work cannot be seen through an exclusively political lens, and because her versatility cannot be captured by a sect or special interest, Kamaladevi is a forgotten figure today. Yet, from this historian's point of view, she has strong claims to being regarded as the greatest Indian woman of modern times.

## II

Earlier this year, I was invited to be part of a jury to select the 'Greatest Indian Since Gandhi'. The organizers did me the favour of showing me a list of hundred names beforehand. Many of the names were unexceptionable, but some strongly reflected the perceptions (and prejudices) of the present. For example, Kiran Bedi was in this list, but Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay wasn't, a reflection only of the fact that the latter did not live in an age of television. There was also a regional bias: compiled in Delhi, the preliminary list did not include such extraordinary modern Indians as Shivarama Karanth, C. Rajagopalachari, and E. V. Ramaswami 'Periyar'. There was also a marked urban bias: not one Indian who came from a farming background was represented, not even the former Prime Minister Charan Singh or the former Agriculture Minister (and Green Revolution architect) C. Subramaniam. Nor was a single adivasi on the list, not even the Jharkhand leader Jaipal Singh.

Since this was a provisional list, the organizers were gracious enough to accommodate some of these names at my request. The revised list was then offered to a jury composed of actors, writers, sportspersons and entrepreneurs, men and women of moderate (in some cases, considerable) distinction in their field. Based on the jury's recommendations, the hundred names were then brought down to fifty.

The names of these fifty ‘great’ Indians were then further reduced to ten, in a three-way process in which the votes of the jury were given equal weightage with views canvassed via an on-line poll and a market survey respectively. The results revealed two striking (and interconnected) features: the strong imprint of the present in how we view the past, and the wide variation between how the ‘greatness’ of an individual is assessed by the aam admi and by the expert.

Here are some illustrations of this divergence. In the jury vote, B. R. Ambedkar and Jawaharlal Nehru tied for first place; each had twenty-one votes. The online poll also placed Ambedkar in first place, but ranked Nehru as low as fifteenth, lower than Vallabhbhai Patel, Indira Gandhi, and Atal Behari Vajpayee. Even Sachin Tendulkar, A. R. Rahman, and Rajnikanth were ranked higher than Nehru by Net voters.

In the jury vote, the industrialist J. R. D. Tata and the social worker Mother Teresa were ranked immediately below Ambedkar and Nehru. Vallabhbhai Patel was ranked fifth by the jury, but an impressive third by Net voters. This suggests that like Ambedkar, Patel has a strong appeal among the young, albeit among a different section, those driven by the desire to see a strong state rather than the wish to achieve social justice. Nehru, on the other hand, is a figure of disinterest and derision in India today, his reputation damaged in good part by the misdeeds of his geneological successors.

The most remarkable, not to say bizarre, discrepancy between the expert and the aam admi was revealed in the case of the former President of India, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam. Only two (out of twenty-eight) jury members voted for Kalam to be one of the short-list of ten. They placed him in joint thirty-first place. On the other hand, Kalam was ranked first by those surveyed by market research, and second in the online polls.

What explains this massive variation in perception? The jury was motivated perhaps by the facts—the hard, undeniable, if not so widely advertised facts—that Kalam has not made any original contributions to scientific or scholarly research. Homi Bhabha, M. S. Swaminathan, and Amartya Sen, who have, were thus ranked far higher than the former President. Nor has Kalam done important technological work—recognizing this, the jury ranked the Delhi Metro and Konkan Railway pioneer E. Sreedharan above him.

In the popular imagination, Kalam has been credited both with overseeing our space programme and the nuclear tests of 1998. In truth, Vikram Sarabhai, Satish Dhawan, U. R. Rao and K. Kasturirangan did far more to advance India’s journey into space. Kalam was an excellent and industrious manager; a devoted organization man who was rewarded by being made the scientific adviser to the Government of India. It was in this capacity that he was captured in military uniform at Pokharan, despite not being a nuclear specialist of any kind.

A key reason for Abdul Kalam’s rise in public esteem is that he is perceived by as a Muslim who stands by his motherland. In the 1990s, as there was a polarization of religious sentiment across India, Kalam was seen by many Hindus as the Other of the mafia don Dawood Ibrahim. Dawood

was the Bad Muslim who took refuge in Pakistan and planned the bombing of his native Bombay; Kalam the Good Muslim who stood by India and swore to bomb Pakistan if circumstances so demanded.

This was the context in which Kalam was picked up and elevated to the highest office of the land by the Bharatiya Janata Party. The BJP wanted, even if symbolically, to reach out to the minorities they had long mistrusted (and sometimes persecuted). In this rebranding exercise, the fisherman's son from Rameshwaram proved willing and able.

A second reason that Kalam is so admired is that he is an upright and accessible public servant in an age characterised by arrogant and corrupt politicians. As President, Kalam stayed admirably non-partisan while reaching out to a wide cross-section of society. He made a particular point of interacting with the young, speaking in schools and colleges across the land, impressing upon the students the role technology could play in building a more prosperous and secure India.

A. P. J. Kalam is a decent man, a man of integrity. He is undeniably a good Indian, but not a great Indian, still less (as the popular vote would have us believe) the second greatest Indian since Gandhi. Notably, the Net voters who ranked Kalam second also ranked Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay fiftieth, or last. At the risk of sounding elitist, I have to say that in both cases the aam admi got it spectacularly wrong.

### III

A nation's pantheon is inevitably dominated by men and women in public affairs, those who fought for independence against colonial rule, and thereafter ran governments and crafted new laws that reshaped society. One of the appealing things about the exercise I was part of was that it did not choose only to honour politicians. The long-list of fifty had actors, singers, sportspersons, scientists, and social workers on it. Commendably, in their own selection of Ten Great Indians since Gandhi, expert as well as aam admi sought to have a variety of fields represented.

Collating the votes, a final list of ten was arrived at, which, in alphabetical order read: B. R. Ambedkar; Indira Gandhi; A. P. J. Abdul Kalam; Lata Mangeshkar; Jawaharlal Nehru; Vallabhbhai Patel; J. R. D. Tata; Sachin Tendulkar; Mother Teresa; A. B. Vajpayee.

Reacting both as citizen and historian, I have to say that six of these ten choices should be relatively uncontroversial. Ambedkar, Nehru and Patel are the three towering figures of our modern political history. J. R. D. Tata was that rare Indian capitalist who promoted technological innovation and generously funded initiatives in the arts. Although in sporting terms Viswanathan Anand is as great as Sachin Tendulkar, given the mass popularity of cricket the latter has had to carry a far heavier social burden. Likewise, although a case can be made for M. S. Subbulakshmi, Satyajit Ray or Pandit Ravi Shankar to represent the field of 'culture', given what the Hindi film means to us as a nation, Lata had to be given the nod ahead of them.

It is with the remaining four names that I must issue a dissenting note. Taken in the round, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's achievements are of more lasting value than Indira Gandhi's. If one wanted a non-Congress political figure apart from Ambedkar, then Jayaprakash Narayan or C. Rajagopalachari must be considered more original thinkers than A. B. Vajpayee. Mr Vajpayee's long association with sectarian politics must also be a disqualification (likewise Indira Gandhi's promulgation of the Emergency).

As for Mother Teresa, she was a noble, saintly, figure, but I would rather have chosen a social worker—such as Ela Bhatt—who enabled and emancipated Indians from disadvantaged backgrounds rather than simply dispensed charity. My caveats about Abdul Kalam have been entered already. In the intellectual/scientist category, strong arguments can be made in favour of the physicist Homi Bhabha and the agricultural scientist M. S. Swaminathan. Although I wouldn't object to either name, there is also Amartya Sen, acknowledged by his peers as one of the world's great economists and economic philosophers, and who despite his extended residence abroad has contributed creatively to public debates in his homeland.

To choose fifty and then ten Great Indians was an educative exercise. One was forced to consider the comparative value of different professions, and the claims and pressures of different generations and interest groups. However, I was less comfortable with the further call to choose a single Greatest Indian. For it is only in autocracies—such as Mao's China, Stalin's Russia, Kim Il-Sung's North Korea and Bashir Assad's Syria—that One Supreme Leader is said to embody the collective will of the nation and its people.

This anointing of the Singular and Unique goes against the plural ethos of a democratic Republic. To be sure, one may accept that politics is more important than sports. Sachin Tendulkar may be the Greatest Indian Cricketer but he cannot ever be the Greatest Indian. But how does one judge Ambedkar's work for the Dalits and his piloting of the Indian Constitution against Nehru's promotion of multi-party democracy based on adult franchise and his determination not to make India a Hindu Pakistan? And would there have been an India at all if Patel had not made the princes and nawabs join the Union?

In his famous last speech to the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar warned of the dangers of hero-worship in politics. In a less known passage from that same speech he allowed that a nation must have its heroes. That is to say, one can appreciate and admire those who nurtured Indian democracy and nationhood without venerating them like Gods. In that spirit, one might choose hundred great Indians, or fifty, or ten, or even, as I have ended by doing here, three. But not just One.

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## **A Partisan History Of The Oxford University Press, Caravan Magazine**

In the 1990s, I spent many weeks in what must, or at any rate should be, every Indian's favourite city—Bombay, a city whose depth of history and richly lived (and intensely felt) cosmopolitanism is in such stark contrast to the even-tempered blandness of my own home town, Bangalore. I would go there twice a year, in February and November, and book myself into a room in the Cricket Club of India. Every morning, I would walk across the Oval, dodging joggers and the odd flying cricket ball, and then skirt round the High Court to the side entrance to Elphinstone College, where, after climbing a staircase stinking with piss, I would arrive at the reading room of the Maharashtra State Archives. Three or four hours of work in the files was a reward in itself: though I often gave myself the further bonus of a Rajasthani thali at Chetna restaurant, before returning for some more digging.

In those days the Maharashtra State Archives were moderately well run (I remember in particular an experienced hand named Lad), and their collections were very rich indeed. Still, my warmest memories of research in Bombay are linked to a private archive that lay down the road, in Apollo Bunder off Colaba Causeway. This was housed in the third (and top) floor of a sturdy stone building owned by the Indian Branch of the Oxford University Press, the world's oldest (and greatest) publisher.

A British historian once said that being published by the Oxford University Press was like being married to a Duchess—the honour was greater than the pleasure. My experience was otherwise. Not long before I began working in their archives, the OUP had published my first book. As scholarly books go, it was a work of art. It was set, using hot-metal type, in an elegant Baskerville by the legendary P. K. Ghosh of Eastend Printers, Calcutta. The cover was arresting—a photograph by Sanjeev Saith of an Himalayan oak forest cut up by the designer to represent the 'unquiet woods' that the book documented. The prose inside, jargon-ridden and solemnly sociological in its original incarnation, had been rendered moderately serviceable by the intense (and inspired) labours of the book's editor, a young scholar with a Ph D in English Literature from the University of Cambridge.

To enter the Bombay office of the OUP in 1993 and 1994 was, for me, like entering an ancient club of which I was a privileged new member. The honour was manifest, but so also the pleasure. In the foyer were displayed the works of the best Indian sociologists and historians—Andre Beteille's *The Idea of Natural Inequality*, Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Ashis Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy*, Irfan Habib's *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire*. Also on display were the works of OUP authors who were not Indian, among them such colossally influential scholars as Isaiah Berlin, Ronald Dworkin, and H. L. A. Hart. The gentry and literati of Bombay came to this showroom, and I spent some time there myself. But my main

work lay upstairs, where, in a locked cupboard, lay the correspondence between a writer whose life I was writing and a publisher who had once dominated the building where I now sat.

This writer and his publisher were both Englishmen who had gone native. They were expatriates of standing, who knew, or knew of, the most powerful Indians of the day. Their own relationship was personal as well as professional. They were (as in those days writer and publisher sometimes could be) really close friends. In their correspondence they discussed books, but also food, music, politics, and occasionally, sex. Their letters were sometimes business-like, at other times warm and gossip-laden. Reading them, fifty or sixty years after they were written, was an exhilarating experience.

Occasionally, hearing me chuckle or gasp, the occupant of the next cabin would come to have a look. Named Rivka Israel, she was a senior editor at the OUP, and the person who was in charge of—and lovingly tended—the archive. (She came from a family of Bombay Jews who made their living as craftsmen of learning—her father, Samuel Israel, had been an admired editor himself.) Rivka, in turn, would sometimes call in the branch manager, a cheerful Gujarati named Ramesh Patel, and have me read out once more that passage about, for example, life with Gandhi's 'sexless and joyless entourage.'

A historian's happiest days are always in the archives. In the case of this now somewhat elderly historian, the days have accumulated into years. Yet of all these days and years, the weeks in the OUP archive in Bombay may have given me the most joy. The letters I found there were, for my purposes, infinitely rewarding; but the real pleasure (and honour) lay elsewhere, in seeing (and sensing) oneself as being part of a great, continuous, scholarly tradition; a freshly-minted OUP author entering a building stocking the works of the greatest OUP authors to work on the letters of a long-dead OUP author—all for a book that would one day be published by the OUP itself.

## II

This year, 2012, marks the centenary of OUP in India. In the history of the press, two men stand out: one white, the other brown. In 1930 an Oxford graduate named R. E. Hawkins came to teach in a school in Delhi. The school closed down during the non-co-operation movement, so Hawkins found a job with the OUP in Bombay instead. In 1937 he was appointed General Manager. By now he wore khadi, though this may have been a mark of gratitude rather than an affirmation of political solidarity; by closing down that school in Delhi, the Gandhians had given him a new life.

When Hawkins became General Manager, the Indian branch of the Oxford University Press had been in existence for quarter of a century. In its first year, 1912, it published the first book of a then obscure academic—S. Radhakrishnan's *Essentials of Psychology*. However—as described by Rimi Chatterjee in *Empires of the Mind*, her history of OUP India's early years—the branch was viewed by Oxford as more vendor than publisher. It was set up chiefly to sell textbooks written by Englishmen in England, and prescribed by the Raj for schools and colleges in the sub-

continent. Sensing the mood, Radhakrishnan himself soon moved to another publisher, Allen and Unwin.

Under Hawkins, the OUP continued to make its money selling textbooks. However, this Englishman recognized that some Indians were now producing serious works of scholarship. He published a few such— A. Appadorai's *The Substance of Politics*, A. A. A. Fyzee's *An Outline of Mahomedan Law*, and, most notably, K. A. Nilakanta Sastri's *A History of South India*, which, seventy years later, is still in print and still indispensable.

While not antipathetic to intellectuals, Hawkins' real interests lay elsewhere, in nature and natural history. The three authors he most enjoyed publishing were the ornithologist Salim Ali, the anthropologist Verrier Elwin, and the hunter-turned-conservationist Jim Corbett. Their writings gave him much pleasure, and their books made the OUP a good deal of money. (None more so that the books by Corbett—*Man Eaters of Kumaon* was bought by the American Book of the Month of Club, whose first print run of 250,000 sold out in weeks. This book commissioned by Hawkins was translated into twenty-seven languages, and was even made into a Hollywood film, of which Corbett commented that 'the best actor was the tiger.')

In the 1940s and 1950s, Bombay was the intellectual capital of India. It had the country's best social scientists, and its only decent English-language poets and writers. In this literary culture, an Englishman known affectionately as the 'Hawk' set new standards of editing and publishing. The writer Laeeq Futehally, working at that time with the magazine *Quest*, remembers that when they had to choose a printer they settled on the Inland Press, 'for it was also patronised by the Oxford University Press, whose General Manager, R. E. Hawkins—in spite of having only one functioning eye—was known to be the best editor and proof-reader in South East (sic) Asia.'

The books published by Hawkins were carefully edited, rigorously proof-read, and often beautifully produced. In the works of his favourite authors, words and pictures were exquisitely matched. No books produced in India before or since match, in this respect, such gems as Verrier Elwin's *The Tribal Art of Middle India* and Salim Ali's *Indian Hill Birds*.

Hawkins retired from the OUP in 1970. Five years later, he was present when the tenth and final volume of the *Handbook of Indian Birds* was released in the presence of the Prime Minister. Asked to speak, the Hawk read out the following verse:

William Shakespeare's a master of words

And a tusker a leader of herds

But wherever you fare

Over land, sea or air

Salim Ali's the raja of birds

In his last years as General Manager, Hawkins was assisted by two gifted young Indians. Girish Karnad was a mathematician by training and a playwright by temperament. Ravi Dayal was a history scholar who had read widely in the social sciences. After seven years in the press, Karnad left to make a career in films. Dayal stayed on, and in 1971 moved to Delhi to start a branch of the OUP there. Meanwhile, Hawkins was succeeded as General Manager by Charles Lewis, a gentle, understated Englishman with an effervescent and politically active Indian wife. In 1975, the Emergency was promulgated, and Mrs Lewis was put in jail by Indira Gandhi's police. The OUP thought it best now to move Lewis back to Oxford.

Appointed General Manager in place of Lewis, Ravi Dayal shifted the head office of the OUP to New Delhi. The city was coming to replace Bombay as the intellectual capital of India. An air of self-confidence was abroad. Scholars in Delhi University and the Jawaharlal Nehru University thought they were among the best in the world. Some certainly were—such as the sociologists M. N. Srinivas and André Béteille, the historians Sarvepalli Gopal and Romila Thapar, the economists Sukhamoy Chakravarty and Kaushik Basu, and the unclassifiable social scientist and social critic Ashis Nandy.

The early works of these scholars had often been published overseas—by Cambridge, Chicago, Blackwell and other presses. Ravi Dayal persuaded them to offer their next books to the OUP, so that they would be edited and printed in the country where the scholars lived and about which they wrote. Most agreed, because they recognized that there were now more Indian than foreign readers of their books, and because it was impossible to refuse Ravi Dayal.

A small dapper man dressed (by choice) in churidar-kurta, Ravi Dayal had a great (if subtly subdued) intelligence, and a greater (and visibly manifest) charm. He was a Kayasth, from a community that produced North India's best scholars and scribes, but also its finest cooks. The Kayasths were also keen patrons of Hindustani classical music. Dayal himself could talk food like an Indian and talk Dickens (and Mill) like an Englishman. He was both vernacular and cosmopolitan, a mixture that characterized the scholars whose books he was seeking. For men such as André Béteille and Irfan Habib were likewise desi and videsi in equal measure. They were naturally drawn to a publisher who bridged their worlds.

By the end of the 1970s, Ravi Dayal and the OUP had shifted the locus of scholarly publishing on South Asia out of the West. This was the stamp that scholars working on the sub-continent most craved. Historians and social scientists, whether living in India or overseas, of whatever nationality or ideological affiliation, were, so to say, lining up outside the OUP's offices in New Delhi. Their manuscripts were subject to rigorous vetting—scrutiny by the concerned editor, and by at least two external referees, in a process that saw perhaps four out of five proposals turned away to other, lesser, publishers.

In the summer of 1979, Dayal, now the most respected publisher in India, received a proposal from a middle-aged, middle-ranking Bengali academic based in England. His name was Ranajit



Guha. At that stage Guha had published one rather obscure book, and that twenty years previously. This was a very specialised study of a single aspect of agrarian policy in 18th century Bengal. As a student in Calcutta, Ranajit Guha had been a fiery orator, and as an academic he continued to work for the most part in the oral tradition. So, although he had himself published little, he had gathered around him a group of bright young devotees who promised to publish a great deal.

Ranajit Guha's proposal to Ravi Dayal was that he and his acolytes would publish a series of collected essays under the running title 'Subaltern Studies'. Where other editors might have been deterred by Guha's lack of distinction, and turned off by the confusing (not to say bizarre) series title, Dayal saw here an exciting move away from the elite-centred narratives of Indian historiography. For Guha and his disciples were genuine interdisciplinarians—historians who reached out to anthropology and political theory to make meaningful sense of the past. They had also moved beyond the colonial archive to seriously explore sources such as vernacular tracts and oral testimonies.

A first volume of Subaltern Studies was commissioned, and duly appeared in 1982. Three more volumes appeared in quick succession. Although some librarians persisted in placing them in the military section, the first four volumes of Subaltern Studies were to radically alter our understanding of Indian history. For the first time, the voices of peasants, tribals, workers—those hitherto excluded from the standard narratives—were brought to centre-stage.

The OUP had also begun publishing the works of creative writers. Girish Karnad persuaded Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sircar to pass on the English translations of their plays to the OUP. An even greater coup was the rendition in English by A. K. Ramanujan of U. R. Ananta Murthy's Kannada novel, *Samskara*, which may by now have sold more copies than any other Indian work in translation, the writings of Tagore and Gandhi only excepted.

To the scholars he wooed, Dayal was a publisher who understood scholarship. To his staff, he was a boss with no sense of hierarchy. One who worked with him wrote that Dayal 'refused an airconditioner in his room because it would have made the organization inegalitarian in a way he considered unacceptable. This was the sort of Gandhian trait that earned him huge respect, and which made his organization congenial and unhierarchical. It created a sort of "Dayal Bagh" in which everyone grumbled about low salaries but where everyone stuck it out because the bidi-smoking boss at least looked like he was in the same boat as the bidi-smoking chaprasis. No one cultivated unglamorous socialist fellow feeling with as much perverseness as Dayal. Most people who worked with him secretly hoped he would one day see the light of capitalist hedonism. But he never did.'

It was not, of course, merely a matter of personality. The subordinates respected Dayal because he knew every side of the business—finance, marketing, sales, etc.—and cultivated an atmosphere of professional pride all around. The scholars trusted Ravi Dayal because he was a

superbly skilled editor. After he retired from the OUP and set up his own list, he published the early novels of Amitav Ghosh, who has said that Ravi Dayal was the best editor he had.

Ravi Dayal may have left the OUP in part because the prose of academics requires far more work than the prose of novelists. He had stayed long enough in any case, so long that (as one protégé claimed) Dayal ‘coauthored and ghost-wrote and may well have rewritten more books and authors than any editor in the history of Indian publishing.’

There is a story that nicely illustrates Ravi Dayal’s integrity as well as his achievement. Sometime in the 1990s, a young journalist went to interview the man who had been India’s best academic publisher and was now India’s best publisher of literary fiction. She found him walking in the small—fifty feet by hundred feet—park that lay outside his apartment. Since the capacious (and glorious) Lodi Gardens lay just down the road, the journalist asked Dayal why he didn’t take his exercise there instead. ‘Too many rejected manuscripts’ was the answer.

Shortly after this I went to meet Ravi Dayal myself. I had come to ask for a favour—that he recommend me for membership of the India International Centre. The IIC needed ‘full’ not ‘associate’ members to provide recommendations, and I knew only two such grandees, an old family friend and Ravi Dayal. He suggested I find another signatory. ‘I would be happy to recommend you’, he said, ‘but I fear it won’t help your case, since I have offended all the Trustees of the IIC’. I took this to mean that he had turned down their various, and variously mediocre, book proposals. But I didn’t know any other full member, so asked him to sign on the form anyway.

My application was approved, whereupon a friend commented that the IIC Trustees perhaps hoped that they could now make fresh approaches to Ravi Dayal with me as their messenger.

### III

In 1989, two years after Ravi Dayal had moved on to start his own firm, my first book was published by the OUP. It was commissioned by Rukun Advani, an introverted scholar from Lucknow who was recruited by Dayal immediately on completing a Cambridge Ph D on the non-fiction writings of E. M. Forster. Advani lacked—and still lacks—Dayal’s charm, but in my view he was, and is, an even better editor of historians and sociologists. Like Dayal, Advani is deeply attentive to language. Unlike his mentor, he has a scholarly background. To write and defend a Ph D thesis, and convert it into a book, means that one can conceive of a large, complex project, break it up into discrete parts, do a great deal of original research, and then write this up as a coherent and connected narrative.

It took a Ravi Dayal to see the potential of Subaltern Studies; and it needed a Rukun Advani to edit the volumes and see them through the press. As a well-trained scholar, Advani knew what made a book (or essay) credible, original, readable, and saleable. It was fortunate for the OUP, and for the world at large, that he was the main editor for the Subaltern Studies series, and that

he edited, too, the individual monographs that the Subalternists published under their own names, among them such influential works such as David Hardiman's *The Coming of the Devi* and Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory*.

To be sure, Advani published some superb studies by non Subalternists, too. These included Harjot Oberoi's dazzlingly original *The Construction of Religious Boundaries*; Chetan Singh's *Region and State*, which radically altered our understanding of the later Mughal Empire; Vasudha Dalmia's important work of literary history, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*; and Mahesh Rangarajan's fine environmental study *Fencing the Forest*.

Speak to any or all of these writers, and they will tell you that they were profoundly fortunate to have had an editor like Rukun Advani, that, in fact, he rewrote their books as effectively and elegantly as his mentor rewrote the books of an older generation of scholars.

Speaking for myself, when I wrote a first draft of my biography of Verrier Elwin—the writer whose correspondence with the 'Hawk' lay in the building in Apollo Bunder—Advani told me to tear it up and start afresh, since a biography had to be approached differently from the sociological treatises I was accustomed to writing. As advised, I went back to my notes, and wrote them up chronologically, rather than by theme. This draft came back marked up everywhere in red ink, with a final comment: 'This is fine as a study of Elwin the scholar and public intellectual, but where is Elwin the man?'

I now read, more closely than before, my subject's correspondence with his mother, sister, and friends, writing this all into the next draft. Advani had, as before, very many stylistic suggestions, ending with the remark that 'this is fine as a book about Elwin the son, brother, friend and husband, but where is Elwin the writer and polemicist?'

I went back to my desk and rewrote the damn thing again. Advani approved, on the whole, of this version, but before it went to press he inserted some references to (among others) Eliot and Handel, references that enriched the narrative while giving the impression that the historian who was its author was a connoisseur of modernist poetry and classical music.

What I owed to Rukun Advani, other OUP writers owed, more or less, to their editors. Ashis Nandy speaks with much affection of Salima Tyabji, the lady who edited his manuscripts. And my late friend, the combative Bangalore critic T. G. Vaidyanathan, became an OUP author only because his editor, Anita Roy, had great skill and even greater patience.

In 1988, the year after Ravi Dayal left, his successor as General Manager, Santosh Mukherjee, was persuaded by Rukun Advani to launch the 'Oxford India Paperbacks'—the attractive republication in soft cover of the less recondite of their scholarly books. Advani also conceived a 'Themes in Indian History' series, under which appeared collections of pioneering papers, edited by an acknowledged expert in the field. These books also appeared in paperback, thus continuing

the work of the Hawk and Dayal in bringing the fruits of Indian scholarship to a wide audience of scholars, students, and thinking citizens.

Perhaps because Bengalis were disproportionately represented, the production and marketing staff of the OUP were also extremely literate, with a proper respect for the books they printed, bound, displayed, and sold. Whether working in editing or printing or sales or finance, the staff had a noticeable sense of belonging. As publishing houses go, this was a very high quality operation. It was also an organization at peace with itself, its sense of cheer radiating the OUP's branches around the country—in Mission Row in Calcutta, on Mount Road in Madras, in Koramangala in Bangalore, in Daryaganj in Delhi, and, not least, in Apollo Bunder in Bombay, all places which this Indian who read and wrote books in English once regarded almost as an extension of his own home.

#### IV

In 2011, the Indian Branch of the Oxford University Press entered its hundredth year. Plans for an extended celebration were afoot: new releases of classic works by OUP authors in India, seminars and conferences, a great big bash at the World Book Fair in New Delhi in February 2012, to be attended by the Delegates of the Press, men of distinction in British intellectual life.

As it turned out, in the middle of its anniversary year OUP India had what may, in retrospect, be viewed as the worst episode in its history. In November 2011, the University of Delhi withdrew an essay by the poet, folklorist, translator and theorist A. K. Ramanujan from the B. A. History syllabus. The essay explored the many renditions of the Ramayana in India, an exercise in scholarship (and ecumenism) that offended right-wing dogmatists seeking to impose a single, authorized, invariant text on the public.

The decision sparked outrage, for Ramanujan was a truly great scholar, whose work has had a profound, enduring influence on Indian and global scholarship. That his essay was being suppressed due to pressure from Hindutva extremists was particularly ironic—for his majestic translations of medieval Hindu poetry had done much to make the world aware of the beauty and depth of our mystical traditions.

The essay had originally appeared in a volume edited by Paula Richman called *Many Ramayanas*, and then in Ramanujan's *Collected Essays*. Both books were published by the OUP. However, they had been allowed to go out of print after a petition filed in a court in the small Punjab town of Dera Bassi claimed that Ramanujan's essay offended religious sensibilities. In withdrawing the books, OUP assured the litigant that it 'very much regret[ed]' publishing the essay, apologized for causing him 'distress and concern', and assured him that the books containing the essay would be withdrawn.

As it happens, the Vice Chancellor of Delhi University had justified his decision to drop Ramanujan's essay on the grounds that since the books containing it were no longer being sold,

teachers and students would not be able to access it. When these facts were made public, a series of critical articles appeared in the press. A petition urging the OUP to bring the essay back into circulation was endorsed by more than five hundred scholars, many of them very distinguished indeed.

The anguish over the OUP's betrayal of Ramanujan was in part because of the press's reputation; in part because of Ramanujan's own distinction; and in part because it followed on other such examples of the betrayal of scholars and scholarship. In recent years, the OUP has withdrawn books on the law, on medieval history, and on Indian nationalism under pressure from fanatics and from the state.

Admittedly, Indian courts are ever willing to entertain frivolous or tendentious petitions, and fighting them can be costly in terms of time and money. On the other hand, the press has on occasion been willing to engage in a battle in court. While it lately acquiesced in the suppression of A. K. Ramanujan's work, it recruited some of the country's most expensive lawyers to fight a tax case on its behalf in the 1990s.

When the first series of articles on the Ramanujan controversy were published, the OUP dismissed it as the work of malicious or motivated individuals. Fresh articles appeared, highlighting previous instances of the suppression of books by the OUP in India. Then came the cross-continental signature campaign. In personal meetings with the company's CEOs in Oxford and New Delhi, OUP authors expressed their anger and dismay. Eventually, the publishing house agreed to reprint A. K. Ramanujan's *Collected Essays* as well as Paula Richman's *Many Ramayanas*.

The original disavowal of Ramanujan in court forces us to ask whether there is anyone working in the OUP today who has read his books and essays. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the focus on scholars and scholarship, so evident in Ravi Dayal's day, is not anymore a conspicuous hallmark of the OUP's functioning. I was myself alerted to this some years ago, when a book of mine appeared for the first time in paperback. Sent an advance copy, I found that excerpts from the reviews of the hardback had been inserted after the prelim pages; in fact, in-between the prologue and the first chapter. The editor to whose attention I brought this lapse had a hard time comprehending what I was complaining about. Other OUP authors have their own stories, of works of scholarship published without an index, with pages transposed, and the like.

About a year ago, I asked the OUP for access to the files in their archives dealing with the abridged edition of Mohandas K. Gandhi's *My Experiments with Truth*, which they had published in the 1930s. I knew from other references that there were many letters to R. E. Hawkins from Gandhi's secretary Mahadev Desai, perhaps some from the Mahatma himself. The letters could not be located—worse, I was told that the archive, sections of which I had consulted in Apollo Bunder, no longer existed. It had been a casualty of the OUP's decision to sell the

property in South Bombay and move their office to the suburbs. The acts were of a piece—the abandonment of that wonderful old building and of all that it contained and represented.

(published in Caravan magazine, January 2012)

## **A PROPHET ANNOUNCES HIMSELF,**

### **Times Literary Supplement**

In the third week of September 1909, The Illustrated London News published a withering attack on the idea of Indian nationalism. Its author was G. K. Chesterton, who was then writing a weekly column for the magazine. The Catholic novelist was not especially known for his interest in Britain's colonies; indeed, this may have been his only essay on the subject. Yet it had a profound impact, prompting a book-length rejoinder by a forty-year-old Indian then visiting London from South Africa.

Chesterton had been reading a journal called The Indian Sociologist, run by young men in London and Paris who sought India's liberation from British rule. He thought their ideas unoriginal; as he wrote, 'the principal weakness of Indian Nationalism seems to be that it is not very Indian and not very national'. There was a world of difference between 'a conquered people demanding its own institutions and the same people demanding the institutions of a conqueror'. The Indian nationalists Chesterton was reading (and meeting) 'simply say with ever-increasing excitability, "Give me a ballot-box. Provide me with a Ministerial dispatch-box. Hand me over the Lord Chancellor's wig. I have a natural right to be Prime Minister. I have a heaven-born claim to introduce a Budget. My soul is starved if I am excluded from the Editorship of the Daily Mail", or words to that effect'.

If, on the other hand, one of these men had demanded a return to a pre-British past, on the grounds that 'every system has its sins, and we prefer our own', Chesterton would have considered 'him an Indian Nationalist, or, at least, an authentic Indian'. This kind of Indian might have defended dynastic politics, on the grounds that 'I prefer dying in battle to dying in hospital'. He would have chosen Maharajas over civil servants, on the grounds that 'I prefer one king whom I hardly ever see to a hundred kings regulating my diet and my children'. Admitting the existence of religious differences in India, he would nonetheless have insisted that 'religion is more important than peace'. 'Life is very short', he would have pointed out: 'A man must live somehow and die somewhere; the amount of bodily comfort a peasant gets under your best Republic is not so much more than mine'. 'If you do not like our sort of spiritual comfort', this authentic Nationalist would have told the alien ruler, 'we never asked you to. Go and leave us with it'.

In September 1909, Mohandas K. Gandhi was in London, to press the Imperial Government to grant freer rights of residence, travel, and trade to members of the Indian diaspora in South Africa. That he read Chesterton's article when it appeared seems quite evident, for he refers to it in an essay he despatched to his own journal, *Indian Opinion*, published from Durban. The essay was posted by Gandhi from London in October; but for some odd reason it did not appear until January 1910. By then Gandhi had answered Chesterton's plea by writing an extended defence of the virtues of ancient Indian civilization.

*Hind Swaraj* (to give this book its name) was completed in ten days flat, aboard the ship that, in November 1909, took Gandhi back to South Africa. Written in the author's mother-tongue, Gujarati, it was published in that language and English (under the title *Indian Home Rule*) in Durban in 1910. With the exception of two volumes of autobiography, it was the only book (qua book, as opposed to collections of articles or speeches) written or published by Gandhi. This gives it a special status; since scholars look for and work with texts, this book is the most accessible and handy way to approach Gandhi. It must be its position as the single, non-personalized, book ever written by Gandhi that encouraged the Cambridge University Press to include *Hind Swaraj* in its prestigious series, 'Cambridge Texts in Modern Politics'.

The Cambridge edition of *Hind Swaraj* was put together by the political scientist Anthony Parel. All Gandhi scholars are in Parel's debt, for having written a careful introduction locating the intellectual influences on *Hind Swaraj*, and for having so extensively annotated the book itself. That said, I must admit to somewhat mixed feelings about Parel's placement of *Hind Swaraj* in Gandhi's oeuvre as a whole. Parel claims that 'all serious studies and biographies of Gandhi... unfailingly recognise that this book is the indispensable tool for the study of Gandhi'. As 'Gandhi's seminal work', he says, contentiously, '*Hind Swaraj* is the seed from which the tree of Gandhian thought has grown to its full stature. For those interested in Gandhian thought in a general way, it is the right place to start, for it is here that he presents his basic ideas in their proper relationship to one another. And for those who wish to study his thought more methodically, it remains the norm by which to assess the theoretical significance of his other writings, including the *Autobiography*. It can also save them from the danger of otherwise getting drowned in the vast sea of Gandhian anthologies'.

Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj* in 1909, at a time he scarcely knew India at all. In 1888, when, at the age of nineteen, he departed for London, he had lived only in towns in his native Kathiawar. There is no evidence that he had travelled in the countryside, and he knew no other part of India. Later, in 1892 and again in 1902, he came to spend several months in the city of Bombay. He also visited Calcutta and Madras to lobby for the rights of Indians in South Africa. However, at the time of the writing of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi may never have spoken to a single Indian peasant or worker (or landlord or moneylender) living or working in India itself.

Withal, Gandhi writes here of the 'ancient civilisation of India which, in my opinion, represents the best the world has ever seen'. A little later, he claims that 'We were one nation before they

[the English] came to India. One thought inspired us. Our mode of life was the same'. About half-way through the book, he insists again that 'the civilization India has evolved is not to be beaten in the world.' He goes on to say that 'the tendency of Indian civilisation is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western civilisation is to propagate immorality. The latter is godless, the former is based on a belief in God. So understanding and so believing, it behoves every lover of India to cling to the old Indian civilisation even as a child clings to its mother's breast'.

This love of the old is coupled with a distaste for the new. 'Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization', insists Gandhi: 'It represents a great sin'. And, again: 'I cannot recall a single good point in connection with machinery'. Railways are chastised for their emphasis on speed, which encouraged greed. 'God travels at a snail's pace', while 'evil has wings'. Modern professions such as medicine and the law also come in for criticism. In Gandhi's view, lawyers fomented quarrels in order to charge high fees, while doctors promoted self-indulgence, so that they could profit from curing its consequences.

If such passages seem to be a direct response to Chesterton, other parts of the book answer other provocations. There had been a series of bomb attacks on British officials in India, the work of revolutionaries who believed that freedom from colonial subjection would come about only through armed struggle. In himself advocating non-violence, Gandhi argued that the view that 'there is no connection between the means and the end is a great mistake'. He spoke of how the wrong means produced an escalating cycle of violence and counter-violence, using the example of a robber who comes and steals from your house. If one then mobilizes one's neighbours, the robber will in turn call on his mates, and the two factions will fight, and fight. If, on the other hand, one keeps one's windows open for his next visit, the robber may be confused, and repent, and stop stealing altogether.

Gandhi did not want to suggest that all robbers would act like this, but 'only to show that only fair means can produce fair results, and that, at least in the majority of cases, if not, indeed, in all, the force of love and pity is infinitely greater than the force of arms'.

The British claimed that there existed an 'inborn enmity between Hindus and Mahomedans'. This nationalist answered that 'the Hindus flourished under Moslem sovereigns, and Moslems under the Hindu. Each party recognised, that mutual fighting was suicidal, and that neither party would abandon its religion by force of arms. Both parties, therefore, decided to live in peace. With the English advent the quarrels recommenced'. In Gandhi's view, the different religions were merely 'different roads converging to the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as we reach the same goal? Wherein is the cause of quarrelling?'

Despite its defence of non-violence, Hind Swaraj caused some alarm in British India. Its criticisms of Western civilization could turn impressionable minds towards the path of protest. The import of the book was banned, with copies seized by Customs both in Bombay and in Madras. When Gandhi heard of this move, he wrote a letter of complaint, which is worth



reproducing for its intrinsic value, and additionally because it escaped the attention of the editors of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Lying forgotten in the bowels of the National Archives of India, it was recently discovered by the septuagenarian historian S. R. Mehrotra, who shared it with this writer.

Dated the 16th of April 1910, and written from Johannesburg, the letter was addressed to the Home Secretary of the Government of India. Enclosing an English translation of the book, Gandhi says:

‘I do not know why the Gujarati copies have been confiscated. If the Government will kindly favour me with their views and their advice, I shall endeavour, so far as possible, to carry them out. In writing “Hind Swaraj” it has not been my intention to embarrass the Government in so far as any writing of mine could do so, but entirely to assist it. This in no way means that I necessarily approve of any or all the actions of the Government or the methods on which it is based. In my humble opinion, every man has a right to hold any opinion he chooses, and to give effect to it also, so long as, in doing so, he does not use physical violence against anybody. Being connected with a newspaper which commands some influence and attention, and knowing that methods of violence among my countrymen may become popular even in South Africa, and feeling assured that the adoption of passive resistance as I have ventured to do in “Indian Home Rule” was the surest preventative of physical violence, I did not hesitate to publish [the book] in Gujarati. The English edition has not been circulated by me in India except among officials and the leading newspapers. At the same time, I am aware that some buyers have sent it on their own account to India also.

I need hardly say [Gandhi continued] that the views expressed in “Indian Home Rule” have nothing to do with the struggle that is going on in the Transvaal and in other parts of South Africa, intimately connected though I am with it; and I am not in a position to know how many of my countrymen share those views. At the same time, no matter where I am placed, I consider it my duty to popularize them to the best of my ability as being in the best interests of India and the Empire’.

Gandhi is here acting as both loyalist and rebel: suggesting that his advocacy of non-violence may come to the aid of the Raj, but reserving to himself the right to say what he wished about the Raj’s policies and actions. The letter held out an offer of compromise; that he might even consider revising passages considered provocative. The offer was refused, with the Government choosing to keep the ban in place. As the Director of the Criminal Intelligence Branch wrote on the file, ‘we must, I think, aim at destroying the open market for imported seditious publications of all kinds: we cannot afford to pick and choose very much according to the degree and quantity of the sedition’. He continued, tellingly: ‘More real perversion of ideas in the direction of sedition is effected by moderate seditious publications than by those breathing violence and revolution in every line’.

Hind Swaraj was moderate in its politics, if immoderate in its condemnation of Western civilization, this, ironically, based mostly on Western authorities. The Appendix lists twenty books or pamphlets consulted by Gandhi in writing the book, of which as many as six are by the Russian, Leo Tolstoy. Other works are by the Italian, Mazzini; the American, Thoreau; and the Englishmen Carpenter, Ruskin, and Maine. Only two of the twenty books are by Gandhi's fellow countrymen, these being Dadabhai Naoroji's and Romesh Chunder Dutt's studies of the economic exploitation of the sub-continent under British rule.

The first Indian edition of Hind Swaraj was published only in 1919. Two decades later, the book was the subject of a wide-ranging symposium in the now defunct Theosophical journal Aryan Path. The contributors, all British, qualified their appreciation of the man with reservations about his savaging of the machine civilization of the West. The chemist Frederick Soddy suggested that the Mahatma may be a prophet without honour in his own country, for 'the internal combustion engine seems to have been at least as busy [in India] as elsewhere in altering the mode of livelihood of peoples'. The writer John Middleton Murry observed that for all its faults, the machine 'nevertheless does offer an immense and universal liberation from human drudgery.' Besides, as a votary of love and non-violence, why did Gandhi not admit the possibility 'that Love can control even the Machine to the purposes of love?' The feminist Irene Rathbone insisted that 'machinery need not be the curse Gandhi declares it is; in a world where the money-changers had been rendered powerless it would be used for the release of man, not, as now, for his degradation'.

These criticisms continue to be made of Hind Swaraj. On the other side, the book is positively invoked by pacifists and greens, who see in its critique of speed and greed an affirmation of the small-scale, the local, and the decentralized. Thus was Gandhi endorsed in E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, and thus an Indian appropriate technologist could write that Hind Swaraj gives us an 'alternate perspective' on economic development while explaining how 'the current model of development is exploitative of man by man and of nature by man'.

Pro or con, these writers all take Hind Swaraj to be Gandhi's key text, to him what Capital was to Karl Marx, *The Origin of Species* to Charles Darwin, *The Critique of Pure Reason* to Immanuel Kant, *The Leviathan* to Thomas Hobbes. Perhaps in those other cases we can more plausibly make these identifications. However, Gandhi was not principally a thinker (or even writer)—as he liked to say, his life was his message. In any case, the Gandhi of Hind Swaraj had no real acquaintance with India or Indians. When he returned to his homeland, to commence a period of ceaseless travel through its towns and villages, he came to better understand the dilemmas of an ancient society grappling with the challenges of modernity. He thus modified his views on the relations between East and West, here presented in a somewhat Manichean form, but later made more subtle under the influence of his friend, the poet Rabindranath Tagore. So too his views on modern machinery, attacked wholesale in Hind Swaraj, but treated in a more nuanced manner in his later writings.

Then there is the central question of caste. From his return to India in 1915 until his death thirty-three years later, Gandhi was deeply concerned to end the evil of Untouchability. From the first, he held the practice to be unacceptable and immoral; although it took time for him to move towards a larger critique of the caste system itself. Beginning with a defense of inter-dining and inter-dining, Gandhi later went so far as to suggest that the only marriages to be solemnized in his presence would be between a Untouchable and an upper caste, a condition that effectively repudiated his earlier avowal of the principle of varnashramadharma (the caste-based division of labour and status). For the Gandhi of the 1920s and beyond, Indians would be fit for freedom only when they stopped subjecting their own kind to the degradation of Untouchability. But of these views, so essential to the mature Gandhi, there is no hint in Hind Swaraj.

Hind Swaraj is probably not the right place to start an exploration of Gandhi's ideas. In the Cambridge edition, Anthony Parel warns the reader against the 'vast sea of Gandhian anthologies', but it is to these anthologies that those who wish to properly appreciate Gandhi must necessarily turn. The more thoughtful, the more informed, and the more essential Gandhi are to be found in his articles, editorials, and letters of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, written as he came to more fully understand the people and practices of the country he was to lead to self-rule. The three selections from Gandhi's writings that I would myself recommend are those made by Nirmal Kumar Bose, Raghavan Iyer (in its three-volume rather than single-volume rendition), and Gopalkrishna Gandhi. Having read these compilations, one can then turn to Hind Swaraj, perhaps to admire its precocious defence of non-violence and religious pluralism, while puzzling over its silence on caste and its demonization of the West.

## **THE PAST AND FUTURE OF THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS**

### **Caravan**

Not long ago, I found myself in a panel discussion on television with three politicians. One was a Congress Member of Parliament, a second an MP from the Bharatiya Janata Party, the third the President of one of the smaller regional formations. In the course of the conversation I found reason to criticize the three netas for their sectarian stands. As the argument grew more heated, I found myself ignoring the others and turning on the Congressman in particular.

Coming out of the studio, and driving home, I later reflected on this partisanship of my own. Why had I been less harsh on the others? It may have been because from them a historian can expect no better. Despite its occasional disavowal of the Hindutva programme, the BJP is a party of bigots which detests minorities and atheists. For their part, the regional parties use the rhetoric of caste and linguistic discrimination mostly to advance the wealth and power of their leaders.

The case of the Congress is different. This was the party that led the movement for freedom, the party that united India and brought people of different religions and languages into a single political project. Its finest leaders were not confined by national boundaries; they had a universalist vision. Its ministers and legislators were men and women of high personal integrity. When confronted with the Congress of today, an Indian who knows some history cannot but be struck by the chasm between the present and the past. Hence the savagery with which I turned on the Congressman in the television studio. Unlike the representatives of the BJP or the regional party, he should have known better than to defend dynastic rule, duck the question of the massacre of Sikhs in 1984, disregard the growing evidence of corruption in a Congress-led government, and so on.

## II

Despite what it has done to itself in recent years, the Indian National Congress is one of the great political parties of the modern world. It has a lineage and record of achievement comparable to that of the Labour Party in Great Britain, the Social Democratic Party in Germany, and the Democratic Party in the United States. From its beginnings in 1885 its ambitions were immense, these contained in its very title, with the last, definitive word indicating that it would not be sectarian, but embrace Indians of all shapes and sizes, or castes and communities.

In the first few decades of its existence, the Indian National Congress built a network of branches spread across the country. The most intense Congress activity was in Eastern India, where the major figures included Surendranath Banerjee and Bipin Chandra Pal, and in Western India, where the acknowledged stalwarts were Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gopal Krishna Gokhale. With their sophisticated intellectual cultures, Bengal and Maharashtra were in the vanguard—but the Congress had a reach and presence in North and South India as well.

By the time Mohandas K. Gandhi returned home from South Africa in 1915, the Congress was a genuinely national organization. Still, it had two serious, and inter-related, weaknesses—it was active only in the major cities, and its debates and proceedings were conducted only in English. Given the shallow social base of the Congress, it was easy for the British to dismiss it as a front for lawyers and other English-speaking professionals seeking the loaves and fishes of office.

Gandhi felt this criticism keenly, and sought to refute it. First, he encouraged the Congress to function in the vernacular, by forming provincial committees that operated in Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Kannada, Oriya, and other languages of the people. Next, he brought in peasants and women, two groups that had previously been excluded from the proceedings. Third, he campaigned to abolish Untouchability and to promote Hindu-Muslim harmony, to answer the charge that the Congress was a party of upper caste Kayasths, Banias, and (especially) Brahmins. Fourth, he worked to nurture a second rung of political leadership, that would work with him in deepening the social base of the Congress and make it more representative of the nation-in-the-making.

In the short and medium term, Gandhi was successful in all but the third ambition. The rejection of colonial provincial categories—the Madras Presidency, the Bengal Presidency, etc—through the creation of local Congresses based on language proved to be a superbly effective link between the metropolis and the periphery. Through the 1920s and 1930s, the nationalist credo was conveyed in newspapers and magazines printed in languages other than English. The flow was not uni-directional; rather, the concerns of the different linguistic communities were also brought to the attention of the All India Congress Committee. Long before Amartya Sen, Gandhi had concluded that a person possessed multiple identities—and that it was perfectly consistent to be both Bengali and Indian, or Kannadiga and Indian, and so on.

It was also Gandhi who brought the rural masses into the freedom struggle. Operating in the vernacular helped here; as did his dress and lifestyle, which resonated far more with the peasantry than the turbans and suits of an earlier generation of Congress leaders. Peasants played a notable part in the non-co-operation movement of the 1920s and the civil disobedience movement of the 1930s, although (as historians such as David Hardiman and Shahid Amin have demonstrated) they were motivated more by their own livelihood concerns—lower taxes, higher wages, freer access to forest and grazing resources, etc.—than by abstract political categories such as ‘nationalism’ and ‘anti-colonialism’.

From the perspective of the modern feminist, some of Gandhi’s statements about women appear to be less than emancipatory. He was opposed to contraception, for example, and decidedly ambivalent about the role of women in the workplace. At the same time, he extolled their character and goodness, and considered them more courageous than men. At first, he was hesitant to allow them to offer satyagraha, but his reservations were overcome by his independent-minded colleagues, such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Sarojini Naidu. In the end, thousands of women courted arrest during the Salt Satyagraha of 1930 and the Quit India movement of 1942. Thus, as Madhu Kishwar once pointed out, more women participated in Gandhi’s campaigns than in movements led by any other man in modern history. In this respect he was conspicuously more successful than ostensibly more ‘modern’ and less ‘chauvinist’ leaders such as Lenin, Mao, and even Mandela.

One of Gandhi’s less noticed achievements was his making leaders of followers. Vallabhbhai Patel was given charge of building the party organization; Jawaharlal Nehru instructed to reach out to the youth and the world outside India; C. Rajagopalachari asked to take the nationalist message to the South; Maulana Abul Kalam Azad told to take this message to the Muslims. The delegation of responsibility was also followed with regard to the constructive programme; thus J. B. Kripalani was asked to establish khadi centres, J. C. Kumarappa set to work on reviving the agrarian economy, Zakir Hussain charged with designing an educational curriculum. In later years, the trust reposed in them by Gandhi helped these individuals make substantial contributions to the political and cultural life of the nation.

A unique and very appealing aspect of Congress nationalism was that it did not demonize the foreigner or the alien. Here Gandhi and his colleagues were acting under the inspiration of Rabindranath Tagore, who made a necessary distinction between the Nation of the West and the Spirit of the West. The former had manifested itself in pillage and imperial exploitation, and had to be resisted. The latter had promoted freedom of expression, equal rights for all, and the spirit of scientific enquiry—all this had to be made India's own.

To be sure, there was often a slippage between the ideal and the practice. Dalits and Muslims did not always feel at home in the Gandhian Congress—hence the appeal of rival leaders like B. R. Ambedkar and M. A. Jinnah. While emphasizing freedom, the Congress did not lay adequate stress on equality—industrial workers and agricultural labourers did not feature strongly in its programmes. Among the Congress leaders in the Gandhian era were some Hindu conservatives, who were deeply unsympathetic to the idea that Dalits and women could enjoy the same rights as upper caste men.

Withal, despite its failures and inconsistencies, the Congress that brought India freedom was a party of distinction and achievement. It had many imitators, such as the African National Congress. Across the colonized countries of Asia and Africa, the party of Gandhi and Nehru acted as a beacon of hope and inspiration. Even when they did not mimic its name or its methods, anti-colonial nationalists remained in thrall to it. Indeed, among the admirers of Gandhi and company was that gun-toting Marxist revolutionary, Ho Chi Minh.

### III

A charge often laid at the door of the Indian National Congress is that it has doctored the school curricula to diminish the role of other actors in the freedom struggle. The part played by the Bengali revolutionaries in opposing British rule, or the struggles and sacrifices of Bhagat Singh and his comrades, do not always feature in textbooks written under the aegis of Congress Governments. It is further alleged that these books also ignore or underplay the contributions of individuals and groups to the right of the Congress party, as for example the liberals or the Hindutva-wadis.

These accusations are not altogether untrue. The Congress under Gandhi's leadership was the major strand in the nationalist movement, but there were other tendencies as well, which, in works written by or under the supervision of Congress Governments, do not always get the attention they deserve. The Congress should also be charged with a more curious crime, which is of not properly acquainting schoolchildren with its own role in the making of modern India. The textbooks sponsored by it may devote excessive space to the contributions of the Congress before Independence; at the same time, they lay inadequate stress on the contributions of the Congress after Independence. For the party of Gandhi and Nehru was not merely in the vanguard of the freedom struggle. This party also helped create and nurture the democratic Indian nation-state.

It is said that when the British left these shores, Gandhi told his colleagues that ‘freedom has come to India, not to the Congress party’. This statement was immediately acted upon by his two chief lieutenants, Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel. Thus Patel played a key role in peopling the Constituent Assembly with legal experts who had no previous party or political affiliation. On his part, Nehru inducted, into the Union Cabinet, politicians who had vigorously opposed the Congress in the past (and were to do so again in the future). They included B. R. Ambedkar of the Scheduled Caste Federation and Syama Prasad Mookerjee of the Hindu Mahasabha. In this ecumenism the Congress was being faithful to the spirit of its founders, who sought to reach out to all Indians, regardless of caste, class, religion, gender, or ideology.

In the gossip that circulates in such places as RSS shakas, as well as in some Internet chat rooms, Nehru and Patel are made out to be rivals. To be sure, they had differences, as any two individuals would, such as husband and wife or even mother and daughter. However, what united the two men was far more important than what divided them. We Indians owe Nehru and Patel an enormous debt for what they did together, in partnership, in the years 1947 to 1950, when they helped construct a nation from its fragments and gave it a democratic Constitution. In this heroic and noble task they had many helpers and associates, most of whom belonged to their own Congress party, but also some who didn’t, such as the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, B. R. Ambedkar.

I have spoken of the differences between Nehru and Patel. On two occasions these threatened to split the Congress party—in January 1948 and again in the monsoon of 1950. Each time, the two men had the sense to work together in the common cause. Each time, the decision to submerge their differences was made partly in homage to their common hero, Gandhi, and partly to save the organization to which the two owed a lifelong allegiance. For both Nehru and Patel, the Congress was their family and their pride. It had given them a home, and it had given meaning to their lives. Both knew that a schism between the party’s top leaders would have dealt a body blow to the Congress. When they chose, on both occasions, to make peace among themselves, Nehru and Patel helped save the Congress, and, quite possibly, the idea of India itself.

The first years of Indian independence were very fraught indeed. Had there been lesser men and women at the helm, or a lesser party than the Congress, the Centre might very well have given way. India could have come under military rule, or broken up into several different parts, or been subject to mass scarcity and famine. But the Centre held. In January 1950 a new, republican Constitution came into being. Two years later India held its first national elections based on the principle of universal adult suffrage.

Through the 1950s and 1960s the Congress party ruled at the Centre and in most of the states. The elections it won were mostly free and fair. The Congress came out successful because it was the legatee of the freedom struggle and because its leaders were seen, for the most part, as individuals of character and probity. To be sure, voters had the option, which they sometimes exercised, of choosing other individuals and parties. Thus in 1957 they sent the Communists into

power in Kerala, and in 1963 they sent three remarkable opponents of the Congress into the Lok Sabha to harry Nehru after his humiliation at the hands of the Chinese. (These critics were the socialist Rammanohar Lohia, the liberal M. R. Masani, and the Gandhian J. B. Kripalani.) Even if such successes were few and far between, by participating in regular elections the people of India were acquiring the habits and mores of democracy.

The Congress established a democratic Constitution, and oversaw a series of mostly fair elections. Another great gift it gave the people of India was a positive ideology of hope. Some other new nationalisms consolidated themselves on an ideology of fear and paranoia, seeking to unite citizens on the basis of hatred of a particular community or of another nation. On the other hand, the post-Independence Congress sought to unite Indians in pursuit of the common goals of secularism and economic development, assuring citizens equal rights regardless of their caste or religion, and working to end the endemic poverty to which most of them had been subject.

For this historian, the Congress of the 1950s and 1960s is best regarded as a school for democracy. Under its capacious umbrella, Indians learned to vote freely and speak their minds freely. They learnt also to craft and trust independent, impersonal, rule-bound institutions such as the judiciary, the press, and (not least) the Election Commission. Like any school there was a gap between precept and practice. Not all Congressmen were squeaky clean. There was inadequate stress on land reforms. And there was a shocking failure in the field of primary education.

The post-Gandhi Congress could have done somewhat better. And it could have done a lot worse. A fair measure of its achievement lies in the fate of other countries in Asia and Africa that obtained their independence at the same time as ours, many of which came under military rule, or disintegrated into civil war. The Indian National Congress may not deserve all the credit for the British leaving the sub-continent. But it does deserve more credit than it has thus far got for laying the foundations of a somewhat united and somewhat democratic Republic of India.

#### IV

One of the forgotten heroes of Indian democracy is Kumaraswamy Kamaraj. This withdrawn, monosyllabic, self-educated man from a modest social background was instrumental in building a mass base for the Congress party in South India. Later, as President of the national party, he helped mediate between different factions of the Congress. But perhaps his greatest service to his party and nation was to successfully oversee two major transitions. First, when Jawaharlal Nehru died in May 1964, he consulted the party's MP's before arriving at the conclusion that Lal Bahadur Shastri would be the best choice to take over as Prime Minister. Eighteen months later Shastri died suddenly of a heart attack. Now Kamaraj again moved swiftly to contain the damage, by helping to choose Indira Gandhi as Shastri's replacement.

An only child, growing up with a sick mother and a father frequently abroad or in jail, Indira Gandhi did not allow herself to easily trust anybody. Her insecurities were compounded by the fact that, at the time she became Prime Minister, her administration had to contend with food



scarcities, insurgencies in Nagaland and Mizoram, discontent in the Tamil country, the birth of the Naxalite movement, an acute foreign exchange crisis, and the still open wounds from wars fought against China in 1962 and Pakistan in 1965. The voter's faith in the party of the freedom struggle was at an all-time low. The Congress somehow managed a majority in the General Elections of 1967, but it lost power in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, in Bengal and Orissa, and, after a spate of defections, in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh as well. One could now take the Kalka Mail from Delhi to Howrah and not pass through a single Congress-ruled state. Even in the capital the party's hold was not entirely secure; it ran the Union Government, but it was the Jana Sangh which now controlled the New Delhi Municipal Corporation.

In a comparable situation, Gandhi, Nehru, or Patel may have worked in even closer collaboration with their party colleagues. However, in the years before she became Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi had little sustained interaction with senior Congressmen. In any case, she did not entirely trust them; least of all her Deputy Prime Minister, Morarji Desai. So, in this moment of crisis, she circumvented the party, instead drawing upon a cadre of loyal advisers, who—not entirely coincidentally—happened to be mostly Kashmiri Pandits. She took the counsel of a Kaul, a Nehru, and two Dhars, but the person she most relied upon was her fellow Allahabadi (and fellow Kashmiri Pandit) P. N. Haksar. As the Principal Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office, Haksar quickly emerged as the second most powerful individual in India. On Haksar's advice, Indira Gandhi acted against the Congress Old Guard, accusing them of being reactionaries who were against progressive policies such as the nationalization of banks and the abolition of the titles and purses of the erstwhile Maharajas and Nawabs. In 1969 the Congress party was broken into two. The faction that stayed with the Prime Minister was soon recognized as the real Congress, especially after it won a comfortable majority in the General Elections of 1971, riding to power on the backs of the slogan of 'Garibi Hatao'.

Indira Gandhi's victory at the polls was followed by an even more authoritative victory on the battlefield, against Pakistan in the war of December 1971. And yet Mrs Gandhi continued to be unsure about her authority. To make herself more secure, she disbanded the old, decentralized structure of the Congress—where district and state units had substantial autonomy—and placed individuals who were personally loyal to her at the head of Pradesh Congress Committees. At the same time, she floated the idea of the 'committed' civil servant and the 'committed' judge, so that key positions in the bureaucracy and the judiciary were also now occupied by individuals known to be loyal and subservient to the Prime Minister.

It is important to note that this undermining of democratic institutions was well under way before the imposition of the Emergency in 1975. By suppressing freedom of expression and jailing Opposition politicians, the Emergency completed a process begun in the late 1960s. Shortly after its imposition, Indira Gandhi introduced a further departure from democratic functioning, by naming her second son, Sanjay, as her heir apparent. The locus of decision-making now shifted from the Prime Minister's Office to the Prime Minister's House. (An early casualty of this shift

was P. N. Haksar, who was transferred from the PMO to the Planning Commission after he suggested that Sanjay Gandhi stay out of politics.)

When Sanjay died in an air crash in 1980, Mrs Gandhi immediately drafted her other son into the Congress party. When she was herself killed in October 1984, this son, Rajiv, was sworn in as Prime Minister. One of his first acts to bring his friends and relatives into politics. Like his mother, he could not bring himself to trust his own party men. This was in part a product of social snobbery, and in part a fear that some senior Congressman desired the top job themselves. Even so, the decision to rely on cronies rather than on professional politicians and administrators was to cost him, and India, dearly. It was his chums from outside politics who advised Rajiv to open the locks in Ayodhya and to overturn the Supreme Court's judgement in the Shah Bano case. These hasty actions contributed to the defeat of the Congress Party in the next General Elections. They also resulted in two decades of almost continuous religious conflict, in which tens of thousands of lives were lost, and the lives of millions of other Indians made more troubled and insecure.

Before he joined politics, Rajiv was a polite and well-mannered young man. When he visited his old school, for example, he touched his teachers' feet in a spontaneous and sincere act of devotion. However, as Prime Minister he could be quite arrogant. At least one Chief Minister and one Foreign Secretary were dismissed at impromptu press conferences. However, the failure of the Congress to command a majority after the 1989 elections chastened him; perhaps he might have acted in a more mature and (dare one say) democratic fashion had he ever enjoyed another term as Prime Minister.

## V

Unlikely as Barack Obama's rise to political power has been, it has scarcely been as unlikely as Sonia Gandhi's. Obama's ascendancy defies history and social prejudice; Sonia's runs counter to the currents of culture and geography as well. Not even Bollywood could script a beginning so obscure—a woman born in a modest home in a small town in postwar Italy—with an ending so remarkable—as the most powerful person in the world's largest democracy.

Sonia's story would stretch the imagination of the most imaginative film director, as well as the sensitivities of the most sensitive biographer. From the point of view of the historian of the Congress, however, all one needs to note is that, like Indira and Rajiv before her, she is a profoundly insecure person. She was a devoted wife and mother; secure and happy in her family life, she watched with horror as her husband was dragged into public life, and thrust into the office of Prime Minister. And then he was murdered, as brutally and unexpectedly as his mother had been.

The assassinations of her husband and mother-in-law must have made Sonia deeply vulnerable. Even now, nearly twenty years after Rajiv's death, the insecurities persist. She trusts her

children, implicitly and wholly; has faith in a few of her husband's old friends, and in her political secretary, Ahmed Patel. For the rest, she is prepared to watch and observe.

Jawaharlal Nehru did not hope or desire that his daughter should succeed him as Prime Minister—a fact that is not as widely known as it should be. On the other hand, Indira Gandhi worked to make first Sanjay and then Rajiv her political successor. Sonia Gandhi has followed her mother-in-law scrupulously in this respect, for she has likewise made clear her wish that her son should take control of the party, and, in time, the Government.

This December, Sonia Gandhi will preside over the one-hundred-and-twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Indian National Congress. It is not clear how deep is her acquaintance with the history of the party she now leads. Does she know, for example, that for most of its existence, the Congress was a democratic, decentralized, party, with strong state units and a cadre of dedicated and patriotic workers? It seems unlikely. Sonia Gandhi moved to India in 1968; the next year Indira Gandhi split the Congress. Between 1969 and 1984 she knew the Congress to be merely an extension of her mother-in-law's will and whim; a pattern that was to continue through the seven years that her husband was in control of the party.

Sonia Gandhi is fanatically devoted to the memory of the two Congress Prime Ministers with whom she shared a home. This past October, she visited the Indira Gandhi memorial on Safdarjung Road, to personally supervise its dusting and cleaning on the eve of the twenty-fifth anniversary of her martyrdom. Sonia adored her husband; and he adored her. This is common knowledge, especially among Congress Chief Ministers, who know that the best way to ingratiate oneself with their Party President is to name a large and permanent new structure after her late husband (as with the 'Rajiv Gandhi' Sea Link in Mumbai and the 'Rajiv Gandhi' International Airport in Hyderabad.)

In an interview she gave the journalist Vir Sanghvi, Sonia Gandhi said she joined politics to honour the memory and sacrifice of the family members whose photographs graced the walls of her house. Passing, several times a day, the portraits of Nehru, Indira, and Rajiv, she could not refuse the invitation to lead the party they had once led. After she entered politics there has been an occasional appreciative reference to Mahatma Gandhi, but the many other remarkable individuals who contributed to making the Congress the most enduring and influential party in India do not seem to have entered her angle of vision. Campaigning in Gujarat, she may be compelled to mention Vallabhbhai Patel; in West Bengal, the name of Subhas Bose is possibly inserted into her speech by her ghostwriter. For the most part, however, the history of the Congress is identified in her mind with the leadership of Rajiv Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru—in that order.

How much more does Sonia Gandhi's son know about the past of the party of which he is now the General Secretary? I was recently discussing the 'succession' question with a friend who has experienced modern Indian political history at rather closer quarters than I have. How would his

more distant forbears have looked on the possibility of Rahul Gandhi becoming Prime Minister of India, I asked? Motilal would have been pink with pride, said my friend, whereas Jawaharlal would have turned crimson with embarrassment.

The Indian National Congress was Jawaharlal Nehru's true and proper family. Neglectful of his wife, distant towards his daughter, unsuccessful as a lawyer, it was the Congress that gave real meaning and purpose to Nehru's life. For nearly fifty years it was his primary affiliation and allegiance. In the years before Independence, he worked ferociously hard in building the party's profile in northern India. He also travelled extensively across Europe and Asia to take the message of Congress nationalism to the world. These activities were interrupted by periodic bouts of jail-going, which however afforded the opportunity of forging ever closer friendships with his fellow Congressmen and, it must be added, Congresswomen.

Nehru's attachment to the Congress comes out most vividly in his writings. His Letters to Chief Ministers contain frequent references to freedom fighters who had recently died, commending their work and example to those who were alive and still sought to serve India. His most famous book, *The Discovery of India*, is dedicated to 'my colleagues and co-prisoners in the Ahmadnagar Fort Camp'. These colleagues were, of course, all Congressmen, likewise jailed for their involvement in the Quit India movement. The preface builds on the dedication in these still moving words:

'My eleven companions in Ahmadnagar Fort were an interesting cross-section of India and represented in their several ways not only politics but Indian scholarship, old and new, and various aspects of present-day India. Nearly all the principal living languages, as well as the classical languages which have powerfully influenced India in the past and present, were represented and the standard was often that of high scholarship. Among the classical languages were Sanskrit and Pali, Arabic and Persian; the modern languages were Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Guj[a]rati, Marathi, Telugu, Sindhi and Oriya. I had all this wealth to draw upon and the only limitation was my own capacity to profit by it'.

Nehru was not prone to false modesty, so we may take that last caveat as being wholly sincere. At any event, one cannot imagine Indira, Rajiv, or Sonia writing in this fashion. This is so for at least three reasons: they lacked the literary ability, they did not have the good fortune (or otherwise) to spend extended periods in prison, and they did not think that they had much to learn from other members of the Congress.

Rahul Gandhi does not appear to have Nehru's writing skills, either, nor his knowledge of Indian history or his interest in global politics. And it is hardly likely that he shall spend time in jail. There may however be one aspect of personal biography that he may yet come to share with his great grand-father; namely, a long apprenticeship in the Congress Party. Admittedly, he may still find it hard to learn from his party colleagues; whereas Nehru entered the Congress with tens of thousands of other Indians motivated by Gandhi's call, Rahul joined the Congress as the

presumptive heir of what had by now become a family firm. That said, unlike his father, mother, and uncle (Sanjay), he is acutely aware of this unearned privilege. In several recent speeches he has spoken of his discomfort with having benefited from the accident of birth. He has also spoken of the need to restore inner-party democracy within the Congress, such that it might come to have genuinely autonomous state committees whose members and leaders are chosen by direct elections rather than nominated by the 'High Command'.

Indira Gandhi had just over a year as a junior Minister in Lal Bahadur Shastri's Cabinet before becoming Prime Minister. Rajiv Gandhi spent three years in politics before becoming Prime Minister. From the time he abandoned his small car project, Sanjay Gandhi acted, with his mother's approval, as if he were now the second most powerful man in India. By contrast, Rahul Gandhi's rise has been less meteoric. He has already spent six years as an ordinary Member of Parliament; although one does not know when, or how soon, he shall be asked to join the Union Cabinet or to head it. If he agrees to either, that may be the end of his present efforts to limit sycophancy and enhance transparency within the Congress party.

## VI

An overwhelming majority of Indians reject the claims of the far right that the fact of Sonia Gandhi's birth in Italy somehow undermines her identification with this country. Like her husband and mother-in-law, she is a thoroughgoing patriot. Like Indira and Rajiv, again, she has in some ways contributed positively to the life of the nation. Indira Gandhi encouraged scientists, promoted film-makers and artisans, refused to allow India to serve American imperial interests (in Vietnam, for example), and was a superb war leader in the crisis of 1971. Rajiv supported political decentralization through 'panchayati raj', and saw, very early on, the potential of information and communication technology. Sonia has focused attention on the rural poor and bravely stood out against Hindu communalism.

Against these contributions, one must juxtapose some very considerable failures. These include the Emergency of 1975-7, for which Indira and Sanjay Gandhi were largely responsible; the communal conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s, to which Rajiv Gandhi contributed as much as the BJP; and the now near ubiquitous presence of cronyism and sycophancy

in both party and government, for which Sonia Gandhi must take a fair share of the blame.

Borrowing a line from the immortal comic actor Johnny Walker, I once characterized India as a 'phiphty-phiphty' democracy. The record of the political party which has most centrally defined Indian democracy is likewise very mixed. The citizen may conclude—as indeed she and he did in the General Elections of 2009—that the Congress is still somewhat better than the other parties in the competition. The historian is obliged to add that the party is nonetheless rather worse than it was. In terms of intelligence and integrity, the best leaders of the Congress once were a match for politicians anywhere. Before Independence, the Congress party promoted a distinctive form of nationalism, that was inclusive and non-adversarial. After Independence, it

united a nation from its fragments and nurtured the institutions and processes of democracy. It is only in the last three-and-a-half decades that the Congress has worked as much to degrade as to deepen democracy and national unity in India.

The main form that this degradation has taken is through appointing the wrong people to the wrong jobs. Chief Ministers, Cabinet Ministers, Secretaries to Government, Election Commissioners, University Vice Chancellors, even Directors of Museums, are chosen on the basis of their proximity to the Congress President, or to someone who is close to the Congress President. Ability or competence are merely incidental. This policy, inaugurated by Indira Gandhi, was then emulated by the other parties, except that they fixed appointments on the basis of ideology (as with the BJP and the CPM), or caste and linguistic identity (as with the DMK, the Akalis, the Shiv Sena, the TDP, the AGP, the BSP, the SP, the RJD et.al.). For forty years now, the autonomy of public institutions has been eroded by the appointment of individuals whose main qualification is something other than professional competence. The choice of an insufficiently qualified but politically well connected individual to head an institution leads to a steady erosion in its functioning. The lower ranks are demoralized and demotivated; the upper ranks, focused on flattering their bosses, who, in turn, seek only to maintain their good standing with the politician to whom they owe their job.

India today needs to make its economic growth more inclusive and sustainable. It needs to make its democracy more transparent, and less susceptible to the influence of big money and corporate interests. It needs to reconcile the people of its disturbed borderlands, and to be vigilant against threats from across the borders. For this to happen, our political parties, our bureaucracy, our judiciary, our police, our army, our scientific institutions, our schools, universities, hospitals, and welfare programmes—these all have to function far more efficiently than at present, and in the Centre as well as in the States. The process of reform and renewal must necessarily be initiated by the Congress, because it is the party in power, and because it remains, at least in theory, the only national party. Were it to rid itself of control by a single family, it may once more begin to contribute constructively to nation-building—by helping to repair, one by one, the institutions that have safeguarded our unity amidst diversity, and by forging, also one by one, the new institutions that are required to meet the fresh challenges of the twenty-first century. (published in Caravan, March 2010)

# THE RISE AND FALL OF THE BILINGUAL INTELLECTUAL

## Economic and Political Weekly

This essay is inspired by an argument between the scholar-librarian B. S. Kesavan and his son Mukul that I was once privy to. I forget what they were fighting about. But I recall that the father, then past ninety years of age, was giving as good as he got. At periodic intervals he would turn to me, otherwise a silent spectator, and pointing to his son, say: 'Makku!' 'Paithyam'! Those were words that Mukul, born in Delhi of a Hindi-speaking mother, did not himself understand. But I did. They meant, roughly and respectively, 'imbecile' and 'lunatic'.

B. S. Kesavan knew that I lived in Bangalore, that both my parents were Tamil, and that one of my great-uncles had been a Tamil scholar. Thus, when his son's stupidity (real or alleged) could not be adequately conveyed in their shared language, namely, English, he took recourse to his mother-tongue, which was also theoretically mine. The emphasis must be on 'theoretically'. My great-uncle the Tamil scholar used to write postcards asking me to 'learn Tamil and lead a simple life'. I failed him wholly in the second respect, but have down the years managed to pick up a few dozen words of Tamil, among them makku and paithyam.

B. S. Kesavan was formidably multilingual. He was fluent in Tamil, Kannada, and English, spoke Bengali adequately and Hindi passably, and had a good grasp of Sanskrit. No doubt his multilingualism came in handy in his work as the first Indian Director of the National Library, his nurturing of a national information system, and his pioneering histories of publishing and printing. However, his taste for languages was shared by many other Indians of his generation who did not necessarily require those skills in their jobs or careers. My own father, for instance, who was a paper technologist by profession, speaks English and Tamil well, and Kannada and Hindi passably. He also has a reading knowledge of French and German. On the other hand, Mukul Kesavan and I are essentially comfortable in English alone. We can speak Hindi conversationally, and use documents written in Hindi for research purposes. But we cannot write scholarly books or essays in Hindi. And neither of us can pretend to a third language at all.

## II

Let me move now from the personal to the historical, to an argument on the question of language between two great modern Indians. In the month of April 1921, Mahatma Gandhi launched a broadside against English education. First, in a speech in Orissa, he described it as an 'unmitigated evil'. Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Rammohan Roy would, said Gandhi, have 'been far greater men had they not the contagion of English learning'. In Gandhi's opinion, these two influential and admired Indians 'were so many pigmies who had no hold upon the people compared with Chaitanya, Sanker, Kabir, and Nanak'. Warming to the theme, Gandhi insisted that 'what Sanker alone was able to do, the whole army of English-knowing men can't do. I can multiply instances? Was Guru Govind a product of English education? Is there a single English-

knowing Indian who is a match for Nanak, the founder of a sect second to none in point of valour and sacrifice?... If the race has even to be revived it is to be revived not by English education’.

A friend, reading the press reports of this talk in Orissa, asked Gandhi to explain his views further. Writing in his own newspaper, the Mahatma clarified that ‘it is my considered opinion that English education in the manner it has been given has emasculated the English-educated Indian, it has put a severe strain on the Indian students’ nervous energy, and has made of us imitators. The process of displacing the vernaculars has been one of the saddest chapters in the British connection.’ ‘Rammohan Rai would have been a greater reformer’, claimed the Mahatma, ‘and Lokmanya Tilak would have been a greater scholar, if they had not to start with the handicap of having to think in English and transmit their thoughts chiefly in English’. Gandhi argued that ‘of all the superstitions that affect India, none is so great as that a knowledge of the English language is necessary for imbibing ideas of liberty, and developing accuracy of thought’. As a result of the system of education introduced by the English, ‘the tendency has been to dwarf the Indian body, mind and soul’.

One does not know whether the Mahatma’s anonymous friend was content with this clarification. But someone who was less than satisfied with Gandhi’s views was the poet Rabindranath Tagore. He was then travelling in Europe, where he received, by post, copies of Gandhi’s articles. Tagore was dismayed by their general tenor, and by the chastisement of Rammohan Roy in particular. On the 10th of May, 1921, he wrote to their common friend C. F. Andrews saying ‘I strongly protest against Mahatma Gandhi’s depreciation of such great personalities of Modern India as Rammohan Roy in his zeal for declaiming against our modern education’. Gandhi had celebrated the example of Nanak and Kair, but, as Tagore suggested, those saints ‘were great because in their life and teaching they made organic union of the Hindu and Muhammadan cultures—and such realization of the spiritual unity through all differences of appearance is truly Indian’.

In learning and appreciating English, argued Tagore, Ram Mohun Roy had merely carried on the good work of Nanak and Kabir. Thus ‘in the modern age Ram Mohun Roy had that comprehensiveness of mind to be able to realize the fundamental unity of spirit in the Hindu, Muhammadan and Christian cultures. Therefore he represented India in the fulness of truth, and this truth is based, not upon rejection, but on perfect comprehension’. Tagore pointed out that ‘Rammohan Roy could be perfectly natural in his acceptance of the West, not only because his education had been perfectly Eastern,—he had the full inheritance of the Indian wisdom. He was never a school boy of the West, and therefore he had the dignity to be the friend of the West. If he is not understood by modern India, this only shows the pure light of her own truth has been obscured for the moment by the storm-clouds of passion’.

Tagore’s letter to Andrews was released to the press, and read by Gandhi. His answer was to say that he did ‘not object to English learning as such’, but merely to its being made a fetish, and to its being preferred as a medium of education to the mother-tongue. ‘Mine is not a religion of the



prison-house', he insisted: 'it has room even for the least among God's creation'. Refuting the charge that he or his non-co-operation movement were a manifestation of xenophobia, he said: 'I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet'. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off by any'.

These words are emblazoned in halls and auditoria across India, but always without the crucial first line: 'I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great Poet'. In truth, despite this argument in theory, in practice Gandhi and Tagore were more-or-less on the same side. Gandhi wrote his books in Gujarati, but made certain that they were translated into English so as to reach a wider audience. And when required he could use the conqueror's language rather well himself. His first published articles, that appeared in the journal of the Vegetarian Society of London in 1891, were written in the direct and unadorned prose that was the hallmark of all his work in English, whether petitions to the colonial government, editorials in his journals *Indian Opinion*, *Young India*, and *Harijan*, or numerous letters to friends. In writing in more than one language, Gandhi was in fact merely following in the footsteps of those he had criticized. For Bal Gangadhar Tilak's mother-tongue was Marathi, a language in which he did certainly publish essays. On his part, Rammohan Roy had published books in Persian and essays in Bengali before he came to write in English (he was also fluent in Sanskrit and Arabic). As for Tagore, this man who shaped and reshaped the Bengali language through his novels and poems, made sure that his most important works of non-fiction were available in English. His major political testament, *Nationalism*, was based on lectures he wrote and delivered in English. His important and still relevant essays on relations between East and West were either written in English or translated by a colleague under his supervision. Tagore understood that while love and humiliation at the personal or familial level were best expressed in the mother tongue, impersonal questions of reason and justice had to be communicated in a language read by more people and over a greater geographical space than Bengali.

By writing in English as well as their mother-tongue, Gandhi and Tagore were serving society as well as themselves. They reached out to varied audiences—and, by listening to their views, broadened the bases of their own thought. This open-minded-ness was also reflected in their reading. Thus Gandhi read (and was influenced by) thinkers who were not necessarily Gujarati. The debt he owed to Ruskin and Tolstoy was scarcely less than that owed to Raychandbhai or Narsing Mehta. Gandhi was also enriched by the time he spent outside Gujarat—the several years in England, the several decades in South Africa, the millions of miles travelling through the Indian countryside.

On his part, Tagore was widely read in European literature. When he visited Germany in the 1920s at the invitation of his publisher, Kurt Wolff, his host remembered the 'universal breadth of Tagore's learning', their conversations revealing 'without doubt that he knew far more of the West than most of the Europeans he encountered knew of the East'. Tagore had spoken, among other things, of the work of T. S. Eliot. 'It is quite remarkable', said Wolff, 'that someone born in

India in 1861 should display such an interest in and grasp of an Anglo-American poet thirty years his junior’.

Like Gandhi, Tagore learnt as much from his travels as from his books. He spent long periods in Europe, visited Japan and the United States several times, and also went to China, South-east Asia, Iran, and Latin America.

### III

For Gandhi, and for Tagore, the foreign language was a window into another culture, another civilization, another way (or ways) of living in the world. For them, the command of a language other than their own was a way of simultaneously making themselves less parochial and their work more universal. Their readings and travels fed back into their own writing, thus bringing the world to Bengal and Gujarat, and (when they chose to write in the foreign language) Bengal and Gujarat to the world. Bilingualism was here a vehicle or something larger and more enduring—namely, multiculturalism.

In these respects Gandhi and Tagore were wholly representative. Before them there was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who moved between Urdu and English as he strove simultaneously to make the British more sensitive to Muslim interests and Muslims more willing to engage with modernity. After them there was B. R. Ambedkar, who wrote in Marathi for a local constituency; and in English for the rest of India and for the world. Ambedkar knew his Tukaram, but also his John Stuart Mill. To take another example, C. Rajagopalachari is still admired for his English style; but few now know that he was a pioneering essayist and short-story writer in Tamil. He knew his Kural, but—as he once reminded an interviewer—he had also read Thoreau well before he met Mahatma Gandhi. Rajaji’s contemporary V. D. Savarkar also wrote books in English, as well as plays and polemical tracts in Marathi. From the other end of the political spectrum, consider the communist Hiren Mukherjee, who was a prolific writer and polemicist in both Bengali and English.

A thinker-politician who, at first glance, may seem to have been an aberration is Rammanohar Lohia. To be sure, Lohia called for the abolition of English from educational institutions and in public life, and, at the same time, for the countrywide promotion of Hindi. However, Lohia advocated not monolingualism but multilingualism. He asked for school instruction to be provided in the mother tongue, but insisted that children must, in addition, learn two other languages—Hindi, and either a foreign language or another Indian language. He saw the need for an international language, to be used in communications between nations, but was not convinced that this had necessarily and for all time to be English. The role had been played by French in the past; and would, he thought, perhaps be played by Russian or Chinese in the future. Lohia himself knew German (he had taken his Ph D at the University of Berlin), while some of his finest polemical essays against the use of English were written in that language itself.

So in fact Lohia was not an exception after all. Bilingualism and multiculturalism came naturally to him, as it did to the other leaders of his generation. It also came naturally to the social scientists who were their contemporaries. Of those active in the 1940s and 1950s, the anthropologists Nirmal Kumar Bose and Irawati Karve, the economist D. R. Gadgil, and the sociologist D. P. Mukerji—all made a name for themselves for their work in English as well as for their writings in their mother tongue. They tended to publish academic papers in English, and more popular or literary essays in Bengali or Marathi. Sometimes the work in the local language was translated into English, and made a considerable impact (as for example with Karve's rendition of the Mahabharata, *Yuganta*.) As with Gandhi and Tagore, the process of enrichment was two-sided—they themselves became less parochial, while through their writings they allowed their parish to feel palpably part of a wider world.

The bilingualism of the politicians and scholars was matched by the writers and critics. It was, I think, Harish Trivedi who first noted that many of the finest creative writers of the middle decades of the twentieth century were Professors of English, yet wrote their poems and stories in other languages. His essay is not at hand as I write, but among the names Professor Trivedi may have mentioned were the poet Gopalkrishna Adiga and the novelist U. R. Anantha Murty in Kannada; the poet Harivanshrai Bachchan and the short story writer Nirmal Verma in Hindi; and the poet Firaq Gorakhpuri in Urdu. All taught English literature; some even had Ph D's in the subject from the best British

Universities. Literary historians could doubtless add many other names to the list—of established writers in Assamese, Oriya, Bengali, Tamil, Telugu, etc who made their living teaching English yet wrote in the mother tongue in order to live.

Here, too, facility with more than one tongue was a matter not just of skill but also of sensibility. The writer, his work, and his audience, all benefited from the fact that the person in question was in command of more than one linguistic or cultural universe. Surely Bachchan's Hindi verse must have at some level been influenced by, or been a response to, his doctoral work at Cambridge on W. B. Yeats. By the same token, his classroom teaching and the occasional essays he wrote in English must certainly have been enriched by his immersion in the world of Hindi letters.

(Perhaps the most striking instance of this bilingualism concerns the crafting of Premchand's *Godan*. This work, published in 1936, is considered the very archetype of the modern Hindi novel, yet the author first outlined the plot in English!)

In the inter-war period, no Indian town better expressed this multi-linguality than the town where B. S. Kesavan spent some of his best years, Mysore. Among the town's residents then were the Kannada poet K. V. Puttappa (Kuvempu), who wrote political essays in English; the English novelist R. K. Narayan, who was equally fluent in Tamil and Kannada; and the journalist H. Y. Sharada Prasad, who thought and wrote in Kannada, but whose command of English was later

put to good effect in the very many speeches he ghosted for successive Prime Ministers of India. A somewhat younger resident was A. K. Ramanujan, who later recalled that, growing up in Mysore, he had necessarily to become equally familiar with the language of the street (Kannada), the language of the kitchen (Tamil, spoken by his mother), and the language of the study upstairs (occupied by his father, who liked to converse in English). Ramanujan was an accomplished poet in both Kannada and English, and achieved undying fame for his translations into English of Kannada and Tamil folklore and folk poetry—work that was enabled, in the first instance, by his growing up in the multi-lingual intellectual universe of Mysore.

Mysore was here representative of other towns in colonial India. The intellectual culture of Dharwad, Cochin, Allahabad, etc, was likewise bilingual, with writers and professors operating both in English and in the language of the locality or province. There was a cultural continuum that ran between qasba and mahanagar, between the smaller urban centres and the great cities of the Presidencies.

The bilingualism I have described was a product of a particular historical conjuncture—namely, the advent first of colonialism, and later, of nationalism. The British required some Indians to learn English, to interpret between them and their subjects, and to assist in governance and administration (as well as in commerce and trade). However, over time the language of the rulers also became a vehicle to demand equal rights from them. Thus, from being an accessory in the process of conquest and control, English became an ally in the process of protest and profanation. It was the language in which Indian nationalists chasisted the British for not living up to their own best traditions. Simultaneously, it also became the language in which intellectually or politically minded Indians could communicate across the different linguistic zones of the Empire. Notably, even as they acquired a working knowledge of English (or better), these reform-minded Indians continued to operate in their mother tongue. The latter served best for creative literary expression, and when focusing on the abolition of reactionary social practices; the former was necessary for nurturing or deepening cross-provincial networks of political action.

#### IV

Between (roughly) the 1920s and 1970s, the intellectual universe in India was—to coin a word—‘linguidextrous’. With few exceptions, the major political thinkers, scholars and creative writers—and many of the minor ones too—thought and acted and wrote with equal facility in English and at least one other language. It appears that this is no longer the case. The intellectual and creative world in India is increasingly becoming polarized—between those who think and act and write in English alone, and those who think and write and act in their mother tongue alone.

The state of West Bengal appears to have held out best (and longest) against this separation of literary and intellectual discourses. At least in Kolkata, there are still very many intellectuals who

are properly *linguixtrous*. Earlier this year, Ranajit Guha was awarded the prestigious Ananda Puraskar for a book on Tagore in Bengali. Coincidentally, his collected essays in English were published in the same week. Ranajit Guha is of course a *prabasi*, but of those still resident in Kolkata, Supriya Chaudhuri, Sukanta Chaudhuri, Partha Chatterjee, and Swapan Chakravarty are all world-renowned scholars for their writings in English—and they have written first-rate essays and books in Bengali as well. These scholars are all the wrong side of fifty, but there are, I am reliably told, some Bengali men and women now in their thirties and forties who likewise move effortlessly between the language of the world and the language of the locality.

In a life lived in-between the interstices of the academy and the press, I have had the privilege of knowing and befriending many *linguixtrous* intellectuals. Some are *prabasi* Bengalis, such as those remarkable couples Tanika and Sumit Sarkar, Kalpana and Pranab Bardhan, and Meenakshi and Sujit Mukherjee. Others have come from more subaltern linguistic zones, for example Kumar Ketkar, Madhav Gadgil and Rajendra Vora (Marathi), Shahid Amin (Hindi), Girish Karnad and D. R. Nagaraj (Kannada), C. V. Subba Rao (Telugu), Jatin Kumar Nayak (Oriya), and N. S. Jagannathan (Tamil). Like me, all these writers have written a great deal in English; unlike me, they have published important work in their other language too. In countless conversations down the decades, I have been to them what the readers of Gandhi and Tagore were to those great Indians—namely, a grateful recipient of knowledge and understanding derived from languages that I do not myself speak or read.

Notably, the individuals mentioned in the preceding paragraph are over fifty years of age. Speaking of the younger generation, *linguixtrous* intellectuals run more thinly on the ground—at least outside of Bengal. Of scholars in their forties, I can think easily of only three who would qualify—A. R. Venkatachalapathy, Tridip Suhrud, and Yogendra Yadav. All have considerable and independently won reputations for their writings in their language (Tamil in the one case, Gujarati in the second, Hindi in the third) as well as English. A fourth name might be that of the young historian Arupjyoti Saikia, who writes in both Assamese and English.

In general, though, the gap between the generations is telling. Consider thus the career of Sadanand More, whose major works include a reception history of the poet-saint Tukaram and a study of the transition from Tilak to Gandhi in the politics of western India. As I have discovered on several visits to Puné, he is something of a cult figure in Maharashtra, because of his books and his columns in newspapers. Had he written in English, he might have been considered the Partha Chatterjee of Maharashtra—he is comparable in the range of his interests and the originality of his mind. I base this judgement in part on several long conversations with Professor More, and in part on having read the first half of an English translation of one of his books, which is being undertaken—as a labour of love and disinterested scholarship—by one of the last properly bilingual intellectuals in Maharashtra, the septuagenarian poet-editor Dilip Chitre.

A distinction must be made here between reading a language and knowing it through and through. There are those who are functionally bilingual; and yet others who are intellectually and

emotionally bilingual. I use letters and news reports written in Hindi for my research, raiding them for facts and opinions. But I do not read Hindi for pleasure, nor could I think of writing an essay in Hindi in a quality journal. In this I believe I speak for many other social scientists of my age or younger. These too may be able to use an Indian language as source material, but—unlike their predecessors N. K. Bose and Irawati Karve—cannot see themselves as contributing to literary or academic debate in that language. They, and I, are admittedly cosmopolitan, but in a somewhat shallow sense, knowing the world well without knowing the locality much—or at all.

At the same time, at the other end of the linguistic spectrum, many—perhaps most—of the best poets and novelists in Tamil, Kannada, Hindi, Oriya, Gujarati, etc. are likewise completely comfortable in one language only. They may occasionally read a novel or tract in English, but most of their reading—and all their writing—is confined to a single language, their own. No Kannada novelist of the younger generation has anything like the acquaintance with Western literature and social theory once commanded by U. R. Anantha Murty. The Hindi writers I meet are all deeply rooted in their environment, yet few follow Nirmal Verma in his curiosity about, or knowledge of, the wider world.

My evidence is somewhat anecdotal, but I believe most observers will agree with the thrust of my conclusions—namely, that there has been a decline in the number and visibility of scholars and writers who are properly *linguixtrous*. The third class of bilingual thinkers, the politicians, is wholly depopulated now. In my view, the last active politician to have any serious claims to intellectual originality was Jayaprakash Narayan, who, of course, wrote and thought and argued in both Hindi and English. (Critics with more lax standards may offer the names of Mani Shankar Aiyar and Arun Shourie. In any case, whether intellectual or not, original or not, they operate in English alone.)

## V

There is still a certain amount of functional bilinguality among India's intellectual class; but emotional or intellectual bilinguality, once ubiquitous, is now present only in pockets, these too of chiefly older women and men. What are the reasons for this? A key reason, in retrospect, was the creation and consolidation of linguistic states after 1956. I have argued elsewhere that linguistic states have helped save the unity of India. Had we not allowed states to be constituted around language, and had we instead imposed Hindi on the whole country, we might have gone the way of a now divided Pakistan and a war-torn Sri Lanka.

I believe that on balance, linguistic states were indeed a good thing. Even in the particular context of intellectual work, they have had good as well as bad effects. The expansion of the school network, and the entry into the political system of previously excluded groups, has greatly deepened the social bases of the intellectual class. Literature and scholarship across India was once dominated by Brahmins, Banias, Kayasths, and well-born Muslims. But from the 1950s, very many Dalits and OBCs began entering schools and colleges. Some went on to become

professors and writers, taking to jobs and careers that would have been closed to men and women of their background half-a-century previously.

In most states, however, instruction in government schools was conducted in the official language of the state alone. There was little room for English—sometimes, no room at all. English was removed from Gujarati schools in the 1950s and from schools in West Bengal in the 1970s—each time, at the instance of men (Morarji Desai in the first case, Jyoti Basu and Ashok Mitra in the second case) who were themselves superbly fluent in English. It has been claimed—not altogether implausibly—that the parochialism and xenophobia that underlies the rise of a certain Gujarati politician is not unrelated to the banning of the one language which, to quote that other and more broad-minded Gujarati politician, would have best allowed the cultures of other lands to be blown freely around and about the west coast of India. Similarly, the decline of West Bengal as a centre of science and scholarship is not unconnected to the equally misguided decision to ban English-teaching in the state-run schools of the province.

In the 1960s and 1970s, at the same time as the subaltern classes were producing their first major crop of scholars and writers, the elites were choosing to patronize English-language schools alone. In the North Indian public school I studied in, Hindi was verboten—the boy most badly ragged in my time spoke ungrammatical English with a Hindi accent. The experience was representative—in other towns and cities across India, upper caste children whose fathers may have, in colonial times, studied in government schools where both Sanskrit and the local language had an important place, were sent to ‘convent’ or public schools where English was the preferred language of communication, with Hindi (or its equivalent) allotted a minor, residual and contemptible place in the curriculum.

English in post-colonial India was the language of status and prestige. With the opening of the economy after 1991 it also became the language of economic and material advancement. The spread of English was further helped along by the growing number of inter-caste and inter-community marriages in urban India. If, for example, a Tamil-speaking girl met a Bengali-speaking boy in a office which functioned in English, and the two fell in love and later married, the chances were, and are, that the home language would, by default, be English, this becoming, in time, the first, preferred and perhaps also sole language of the children of the union. Cases like these must, by now, number in the hundreds of thousands. And it is from professional unions such as these that some of India’s most prominent scholars and writers have been and will be born.

This separation of discourses is reflected in the growing distance—cultural as much as geographical—that now exists between the qasba and the mahanagar. Smaller towns tend to produce thinkers and writers who operate in the local language alone, whereas professors and students in the elite colleges of the metropolis are often comfortable only in English. In a cultural and linguistic sense, Karnatak College, Dharwar, is worlds removed from Christ College, Bangalore; D. A. V. College, Dehradun, from St. Stephen’s College, Delhi.

Notably, the decline of intellectual bilingualism has been accompanied by a rise of functional bilingualism among the population at large. Many more Indians now speak more than one language than they ever did in the past. The universe of the farm and village is classically monolingual, whereas the universe of the office and factory emphatically is not. Thus, industrialization and urbanization have brought together millions of people speaking different languages at home. Migrants to cities and towns find that the lingua franca of their workplace is, as often as not, something other than their mother tongue. Bihari labourers in the informal sector in Kolkata have perforce to speak Bengali, while Malayalam workers in public sector units in Bangalore have necessarily to learn some Kannada.

Meanwhile, Hindi and English have emerged as pan-Indian languages of communication and conversation. Where official attempts to promote Hindi in southern and eastern India conspicuously failed, the language has nonetheless spread through the more informal, and hence more acceptable, medium of television and film. In cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad, in Mumbai, and now even in Kolkata, Hindi is widely used as the default language of conversation between two Indians reared to speak other tongues. The spread of English owes itself to more instrumental factors—the fact that it is the language of the international market-place, and of the larger companies and firms that operate in it. Since the best-paying and often most prestigious jobs demand a knowledge of English, there is a huge incentive to acquire it.

And so, while intellectuals tend increasingly to operate in a single linguistic sphere, millions of Indians in other jobs, trades, and professions are acquiring proficiency in tongues other than their own.

## VI

In those essays of 1921, Gandhi had hedged his opposition to English with a series of caveats. ‘I am opposed to make a fetish of English education, I don’t hate English education’, he said. ‘I know what treasures I have lost not knowing Hindustani and Sanskrit’, he continued. We may endorse these sentiments while recognizing, sixty years after Gandhi’s death, that a equal danger lies in making a fetish of the opposition to English. Those who banned English in West Bengal deprived millions of schoolchildren of a wider education. Now, to those Kannada writers who ask for instruction in the mother tongue alone, the Dalits answer—first you did not allow us to learn Sanskrit, now you want to deny us access to English.

The decline of the bilingual intellectual in contemporary India is thus a product of a combination of many factors: public policy—which emphasized the mother tongue alone; elite preference—which denied or diminished the mother tongue altogether; social change—as in new patterns of marriage; and economic change—as in the material gains to be had from a command of English.

The temporal sphere of my arguments is restricted to the 20th century; the spatial sphere, to my country alone. Those who know the history of precolonial India may have interesting and important things to say about the multilingual nature of intellectual discourse in past times.



Meanwhile, as someone who has a casual acquaintance with contemporary Europe, let me suggest that the intellectuals in that continent have gone in exactly the reverse direction to ours. Once, they operated mainly or even exclusively in the language that defined their nation—the French in French, the Spanish in Spanish, etc. Now, with the emergence of the European Union and the growth of English as a global language, these French and Spanish and German thinkers have abandoned their opposition to the foreign tongue without disavowing their own. The best (or at rate most successful) French thinkers now are *linguixtrous*, writing essays and books in their own language as well as in English. Scholars in other European nations have gone even further. Thus the distinguished ecological thinker J. Martinez-Alier writes in English for a global audience, in Spanish for his compatriots, and in Catalan for the people of his own province.

I shall end this essay with two stories which illustrate the sometimes unanticipated glories of the best kind of *linguixtrousness*. When H. Y. Sharada Prasad died last year, a letter-writer in Outlook magazine complained that in all his years in New Delhi, serving Prime Ministers and earning their trust and respect, Sharada Prasad had never lifted a finger for a single Kannadiga. The parochialism was characteristic of our times. For what the letter-writer did not recognize is that by translating the novels of Shivarama Karanth into English, Sharada Prasad had done a far greater service to the Kannada language, and to Kannadigas, than had he got some of them ten minutes with Indira Gandhi or an out-of-turn gas connection.

Sharada Prasad spoke Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, and English very well—and knew some Sanskrit and Hindi too. The other Indian of my acquaintance who comes closest to this multi-lingual *ixtrousness* is the current Governor of West Bengal, Gopalkrishna Gandhi. Literary critics know Gopal Gandhi as the translator into Hindi of Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy*. He has also written his own books, in English. However, these are only two of the languages this good man can fluently read, write, and speak. I recently discovered that his first literary production was undertaken as a boy of seventeen, when he translated the memoirs of Manu Gandhi from Gujarati into English. He speaks Tamil, which was the language of his mother, quite beautifully. More recently, he has acquired an adequate knowledge of Bengali.

For all his achievements, among Indian intellectuals at any rate Gopal Gandhi can only be known as the younger brother of the philosopher Ramchandra (Ramu) Gandhi. Although he wrote several important books, Ramu Gandhi was at his best at the lectern. I have never heard a more brilliant lecturer—a judgement that would I think be endorsed by most people who heard him speak in either Hindi or English, among them the very many students he trained and inspired at the universities of Rajasthan, Delhi, Hyderabad and Santiniketan. After he quit academic life, Ramu Gandhi's main theatre of operation was the India International Centre (IIC), where he would lecture occasionally in the auditorium, and more informally—if to equal effect—in the lounge or the bar.

Ramu Gandhi was the son of Mahatma Gandhi's youngest son, whereas his mother was the daughter of C. Rajagopalachari. In the mid 1950s, when Ramu was entering university, Rajaji

took an extended holiday from politics to write modern renditions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. He wrote them first in his native Tamil, and then translated them into English.

These modern versions of the epics proved so popular that a demand arose for translations into other languages. Rajaji's daughter, Lakshmi Devadas Gandhi, volunteered to do them in Hindi, a language she knew well in part due to long residence in New Delhi. The Hindi versions sold briskly and continuously—they were still selling in the 1960s, and well into the 1970s. Sometimes towards the end of that decade Mrs Devadas Gandhi decided to make a will. However, as the daughter and daughter-in-law of ascetic and incorruptible politicians, she had no worldly possessions to speak of.

Except, of course, for the royalties from those translations. Who then to will them too? Mrs Gandhi had three sons. The first, Rajmohan was a journalist and author of popular works of biography and history—surely the Fourth Estate and his publishers would take care of him were he ever in distress? The youngest son, Gopal, was a member of the Indian Administrative Service—he would, in time, get a sarkari pension linked to the cost-of-living index. That left the middle son, the dreamy philosopher who had left six jobs and declined to accept six others.

So it was to Ramu Gandhi that the royalties were willed, and to him, after his mother's death in 1983, that they came. Every year, without fail, Ramu would get a cheque for several thousand rupees, that would comfortably cover the cumulative bills, for that year, from the IIC bar. And, so, in this manner, works originally composed in Sanskrit, then rendered in Tamil and still later translated into Hindi, were to fuel the belly and the mind of the most brilliant man to have walked the lawns or entered the bar or spoken in the auditorium of the India International Centre.

The story may be apocryphal, but it deserves to be true. For it illustrates like nothing else the beauty and potency of intellectual and literary bilingualism—practiced, in this case, across three successive generations—father, daughter, and grandson.

ramguha@gmail.com

Mails from friends after publication of article in EPW

dear ram,

i read with interest your essay on the bilingual intellectual in epw. i have some entirely trivial points to make.

about lohia, it is curious, isn't it, that while he himself was multilingual, his movement was trenchantly monolingual — so that socialists of that type, even outside north india, somehow thought of hindi as being automatically lingua franca. so, in that sense, lohia vis-a-vis language is a bit like jinnah vis-a-vis religion — cosmopolitan in personal life, parochial in public!

again, among politicians, i would seriously object to your characterisation of JP as the “last active politician” who was both an original and bilingual thinker. that laurel must rest, surely, on the head of EMS, who was both younger, and active till later. one may or may not like his politics, sure, but can one seriously claim he was neither an “original” nor a “bilingual” thinker? but your larger point is well taken — that breed of politician, irrespective of who the last great representative of it was, is extinct.

i like your distinction between functional bilinguality and intellectual bilinguality. i wonder, in that context, whether someone like tanika sarkar qualifies as the latter. does she write academically for quality journals in bangla as, say, rajendra vora does in marathi? (maybe she does, i just don’t know.)

another point. you mention literature, but not theatre. in indian theatre, the tradition of multilingualism is well established, and well entrenched. i mean this at least two ways. think of people like girish karnad (who you mention), habib tanvir, utpal dutt, vijay tendulkar, g.p. deshbande, and a whole lot of others, who wrote plays in one language and also wrote/spoke on theatre (serious stuff, not anecdotal) with great facility in their language as well as english. this survives, happily, in a whole lot of younger theatrepersons as well — safdar hashmi comes to mind easily enough. secondly, a large number of indian theatre directors have working knowledge of more than one (indian) language (excluding english), and many of them have directed plays in more than one language. the best example is satyadev dubey, who writes his plays in hindi, but directs (his own and others’ work) routinely in hindi, marathi and english, and occasionally in gujarati.

incidentally, you will be interested in GPD’s new book, forthcoming later this year, entitled THE WORLD OF IDEAS IN MODERN MARATHI: PHULE, VINOBA, SAVARKAR, in which he argues that

“The number of recent writings on nineteenth century Maharashtra which make little or no use of Marathi sources is simply staggering. Subsequently, the world of ideas within which they locate movements or individuals is inevitably “national” or “international.” It would be nobody’s case that the national or international have no bearing on these histories. Indeed they do. But that is never the full story. It is quite legitimate to view, for instance, German modernity in terms of European modernity. However, a study of German modernity that is unfamiliar with the history of German thought is simply inconceivable. Not so where Indian languages are concerned, where unfamiliarity with the culture-specific and language-specific avatars of modernity is leaving a yawning gap in our understanding of cultural history. In any case, “history” should be plural in India. India’s history is the history of its nationalities. The world of ideas and discourse in any particular language is not merely source material for trying out well-defined and already accepted notions of modernity or national discourse.”

these are, as i said, trivial points. i write in the main to tell you that i really enjoyed the essay.

warm regards,

~ sudhanva

\* \* \* \* \*

Sudhanva Deshpande

Dear Ram,

Read with a great deal of interest your piece on bilingual intellectuals. Being a multi-lingual myself (writing with equal ease in three languages – English, Malayalam and Arabic, and with published works in all the three – and reasonably well-versed in Tamil, Hindi and Urdu), the essay gave me an occasion to reflect on my own personal experiences. To me, knowing all these different languages was not only a matter of great pleasure, but also of professional advantages. Presently, my medium of professional work is Arabic, with occasional use of English.

While I agree with your observations and the fact that bilingual intellectuals are now on the decline, I thought I would draw your attention to many names that you left out, especially from the state of Kerala. You mentioned JP as the last of bilingual intellectual – politicians. I think EMS deserved a mention in that context, although I agree with your earlier assessment (in ‘An Anthropologist among the Marxists’) that EMS was a second rate intellectual. Regardless of our assessment of his contributions, I think it is important to mention his prolific output in Malayalam and English, running into almost 100 volumes. He wrote with equal ease in both languages, and in a prose that is unadorned and distinctive. Likewise, he used to lecture in both languages with equal ease and I had the opportunity to listen to his talks in both languages (it was a particularly a glaring omission given that you mentioned Hiren Mukherjee).

Another major omission was K. Satchidanandan, who continues to write in both languages and has several distinguished books to his credit in both languages. While mentioning Venkatachalapathy, a very good friend of mine, it would have been nice to also mention a contemporary of his, J. Devika. Both chapalaphy and Devika, both contemporaries in JNU and working on modern history, are comparable in not only their bilingualism, but also their contributions to history. Devika has published extensively in English and Malayalam on history and gender. K.N.Panikkar is another person you omitted. Panikkar writes original articles in Malayalam, and has been rather prolific in Malayalam after he shifted to Kerala from JNU. Cartoonist E.P.Unny wrote brilliant pieces in both Malayalam and English and continues to do so. O.V.Vijayan wrote excellent fiction in Malayalam and great political essays in English, besides translating his own novels into English. In fact; Vijayan and Satchidanandan should have figured along with Karnad and Ananthamurthy in the essay.

Hope you are well. I was in India for a month and a half and returned two days ago. Did not make it to Bangalore and hence did not call you. My former colleagues at the American consulate said you had been there for a visa.

I saw a few issues of Madhyamam and liked the translation. I hope you are happy with them.

Warmly,

Shajahan Madampat

Comment by Niranjan Rajadhyaksha: But what struck me was that you have implicitly defined bilingualism as writing in English and one Indian language.

There is another category: people who wrote with equal ease in two Indian languages.

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE BILINGUAL INTELLECTUAL\*

by Ramachandra Guha

(Published in the Economic and Political Weekly, 23rd January 2010)

## **ADIVASIS, NAXALITES, AND INDIAN DEMOCRACY**

### **Economic and Political Weekly**

On 13th December 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru moved the Objectives Resolution in the Constituent Assembly of India. This proclaimed that the soon-to-be-free nation would be an 'Independent Sovereign Republic'. Its Constitution would guarantee citizens 'justice, social, economic and political; equality of status; of opportunity, and before the law; freedom of thought, expression, belief, faith, worship, vocation, association and action, subject to law and public morality.'

The resolution went on to say that 'adequate safeguards shall be provided for minorities, backward and tribal areas, and depressed and other backward classes...'. In moving the resolution, Nehru invoked the spirit of Gandhi and the 'great past of India', as well as modern precedents such as the French, American, and Russian Revolutions.

The debate on the Objectives Resolution went on for a whole week. Among the speakers were the conservative Hindu Purushottomdas Tandon, the right-wing Hindu Shyama Prasad Mukherjee, the Scheduled Caste leader B. R. Ambedkar, the liberal lawyer M. R. Jayakar, the socialist M. R. Masani, a leading woman activist, Hansa Mehta, and the communist Somnath

Lahiri. After all these stalwarts had their say, a former hockey player and lapsed Christian named Jaipal Singh rose to speak. ‘As a jungli, as an Adibasi’, said Jaipal,

I am not expected to understand the legal intricacies of the Resolution. But my common sense tells me that every one of us should march in that road to freedom and fight together. Sir, if there is any group of Indian people that has been shabbily treated it is my people. They have been disgracefully treated, neglected for the last 6,000 years. The history of the Indus Valley civilization, a child of which I am, shows quite clearly that it is the newcomers—most of you here are intruders as far as I am concerned—it is the newcomers who have driven away my people from the Indus Valley to the jungle fastness....The whole history of my people is one of continuous exploitation and dispossession by the non-aboriginals of India punctuated by rebellions and disorder, and yet I take Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru at his word. I take you all at your word that now we are going to start a new chapter, a new chapter of independent India where there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected.

Sixty years have passed since Jaipal took Nehru and all the others at their word. What has been the fate of his people, the adivasis, in this time? This essay will argue that, in many ways, the tribals of peninsular India are the unacknowledged victims of six decades of democratic development. In this period they have continued to be exploited and dispossessed by the wider economy and polity. (At the same time, the process of dispossession has been punctuated by rebellions and disorder.) Their relative and oftentimes absolute deprivation is the more striking when compared with that of other disadvantaged groups such as Dalits and Muslims. While Dalits and Muslims have had some impact in shaping the national discourse on democracy and governance, the tribals remain not just marginal but invisible.

## II

There are some 85 million Indians who are officially classified as ‘Scheduled Tribes’. Of these, about 16 million live in the states of north-eastern India. This essay, however, focuses on the roughly 70 million tribals who live in the heart of India, in a more-or-less contiguous hill and forest belt that extends across the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, and West Bengal.

The tribes of the north-east differ from their counterparts in other parts of India in several crucial ways. First, they have, until the recent past, been more or less untouched by Hindu influence. Second, they have, in the recent past, been exposed rather substantially to modern (and especially English) education; as a consequence, their literacy rates, and hence their chances of being advantageously absorbed in the modern economy, are much higher than that of their counterparts elsewhere in India. Third, unlike the tribals of the mainland they have been largely exempt from the trauma caused by dispossession; till recently, their location in a corner of the country has inhibited dam builders and mine owners from venturing near them.

There are, of course, many different endogamous communities—more than five hundred, at last count—that come under the label ‘Scheduled Tribes’. However, despite this internal differentiation, taken as a whole the tribes of central and eastern India share certain attributes—cultural, social, economic and political—that allow us to treat them as a single segment, distinct not only from north-eastern tribals but also from all other Indians. In everyday language, this commonality is conveyed in the term ‘adivasi’. It is not a word that can be—or is—used to describe a Naga or a Mizo. However, it comes easily to one’s lips when speaking of a Gond or a Korku or a Bhil or an Oraon. For these (and other) individual tribes are nevertheless unified, in the Indian imagination, by some common characteristics. Usually, what they share is denoted in cultural or ecological terms—namely, that these ‘adivasis’ generally inhabit upland or wooded areas, that they generally treat their women better than caste Hindus, that they have rich traditions of music and dance, and that while they might occasionally worship some manifestation of Visnu or Siva, their rituals and religion centre around village gods and spirits.

The basis for these everyday understandings of the adivasi lie in a series of ethnographic monographs written over the years. From the perspective of Indian democracy, however, what unites the adivasis is not their cultural or ecological distinctiveness, but their economic and social disadvantage. As a recent book by the demographer Arup Maharatna demonstrates, when assessed by the conventional indicators of development, the adivasis are even worse off than the Dalits. For example, the literacy rate of adivasis is, at 23.8%, considerably lower than that of the Dalits, which stands at 30.1%. As many as 62.5% of adivasi children who enter school drop out before they matriculate; whereas this happens only with 49.4% of Dalit children. While a shocking 41.5% of Dalits live under the official poverty line, the proportion of adivasis who do so is even higher—49.5%.

With respect to health facilities, too, the adivasis are even more poorly served than the Dalits. 28.9% of tribals have no access whatsoever to doctors and clinics; for Dalits the percentage is 15.6%. 42.2% of tribal children have been immunized; as compared to 57.6% of Dalit children. Again, 63.6% of Dalits have access to safe drinking water, as against 43.2% of tribals.

On the one hand, by not providing them with decent education and health care, the Government of India has dishonoured its Constitutional guarantee to provide the adivasis equal opportunities for social and economic development. On the other hand, the policies of the government have more actively dispossessed very many adivasis of their traditional means of life and livelihood. For the tribals of the mainland live amidst India’s best forests, alongside many of its fastest-flowing rivers, and on top of its richest mineral resources. Once, this closeness to nature’s bounty provided them the means for subsistence and survival. However, as the pace of economic and industrial development picked up after Independence, the adivasis have increasingly had to make way for commercial forestry, dams, and mines. Often, the adivasis are displaced because of the pressures and imperatives of what passes as ‘development’; sometimes, they are displaced because of the pressures and imperatives of development’s equally modern Other: namely,

‘conservation’. Thus, apart from large dams and industrial townships, tribals have also been rendered homeless by national parks and sanctuaries.

How many adivasis have lost their homes and lands as a result of conscious state policy? The estimates vary—they range from a few million to as many as twenty million. Even if we cannot come up with a precise, reliable number, to the question ‘How many tribals have been involuntarily displaced by the policies of the Government of India’, the answer must be: ‘Too many’. The sociologist Walter Fernandes estimates that about 40% of all those displaced by government projects are of tribal origin. Since adivasis constitute roughly 8% of India’s population, this means that a tribal is five times as likely as a non-tribal to be forced to sacrifice his home and hearth by the claims and demands of development and/or conservation.

Adivasis were displaced from their lands and villages when the state occupied the commanding heights of the economy. And they continue to be displaced under the auspices of liberalization and globalization. The opening of the Indian economy has had benign outcomes in parts of the country where the availability of an educated workforce allows for the export of high-end products such as software. On the other hand, where it has led to an increasing exploitation of unprocessed raw materials, globalization has presented a more brutal face. Such is the case with the tribal districts of Orissa, where the largely non-tribal leadership of the state has signed a series of leases with mining companies, both Indian and foreign. These leases permit, in fact encourage, these companies to dispossess tribals of the land they own or cultivate, but under which lie rich veins of iron ore or bauxite.

### III

The sufferings of the adivasis as a consequence of deliberate state policy have been underlined in a series of official reports down the decades. A decade after Independence, the Home Ministry constituted a committee headed by the anthropologist Verrier Elwin to enquire into the functioning of government schemes in tribal areas. It found that the officials in charge of these schemes ‘were lacking in any intimate knowledge of their people [and] had very little idea of general policies for tribal development’. Worse, there was ‘a tendency for officials to regard themselves as superior, as heaven-born missionaries of a higher culture. They boss the people about; their chaprasis abuse them; in order to “get things done” they do not hesitate to threaten and bully. Any failure is invariably placed at the tribal door;... the Block officials blaming everything on the laziness, the improvidence, the suspiciousness, the superstitions of the people’.

After studying twenty blocks spread across the country, the committee concluded that ‘of the many tribal problems the greatest of all is poverty’. Much of the poverty and degradation they saw, said the committee, was

the fault of us, the ‘civilized’ people. We have driven [the tribals] into the hills because we wanted their land and now we blame them for cultivating it in the only way we left to them. We have robbed them of their arts by sending them the cheap and tawdry products of a commercial



economy. We have even taken away their food by stopping their hunting or by introducing new taboos which deprive them of the valuable protein elements in meat and fish. We sell them spirits which are far more injurious than the home-made beers and wines which are nourishing and familiar to them, and use the proceeds to uplift them with ideals. We look down on them and rob them of their self-confidence, and take away their freedom by laws which they do not understand.

Not long afterwards, the senior Congressman (and former Congress President) U. N. Dhebar was asked to chair a high-powered committee to look into the situation in tribal areas. Its members included six Members of Parliament (among them Jaipal Singh), and some senior social workers. The committee identified land alienation, the denial of forest rights, and the displacement by development projects as among the major problems facing the adivasis. Sometimes, state policy had failed to come to rescue of the tribals; at other times, it had only worked to impoverish them further. The state machinery had been unable to prevent the loss of land to outsiders, or to check the exploitative activities of moneylenders. Meanwhile, the major power projects and steel plants set in motion by the Five Year Plans had 'resulted in a substantial displacement of the tribal people'. The Committee was concerned that this form of industrial development would 'sweep [the tribals] off their feet... We have to see that the foundations of tribal life are not shaken and the house does not crash.' Because of the dams and mills already built,

The tribals were dislodged from their traditional sources of livelihood and places of habitation. Not conversant with the details of acquisition proceedings they accepted whatever cash compensation was given to them and became emigrants. With cash in hand and many attractions in the nearby industrial towns, their funds were rapidly depleted and in course of time they were without money as well as without land. They joined the ranks of landless labourers but without any training, equipment or aptitude for any skilled or semi-skilled job.

The Dhebar Committee's most eloquent passages concerned the suppression of tribal rights in the forest. As a consequence of the forest laws introduced by the British, and continued by the governments of independent India, 'the tribal who formerly regarded himself as the lord of the forest, was through a deliberate process turned into a subject and placed under the Forest Department'. The officials and their urban conservationist supporters claimed that in order to protect the forests the adivasis had to be kept out. The Dhebar Committee commented:

There is constant propaganda that the tribal people are destroying the forest. We put this complaint to some unsophisticated tribals. They countered the complaint by asking how they could destroy the forest. They owned no trucks; they hardly had even a bullock-cart. The utmost that they could carry away was some wood to keep them warm in the winter months, to reconstruct or repair their huts and carry on their little cottage industries. Their fuel-needs for cooking, they said, were not much, because they had not much to cook. Having explained their own position they invariably turned to the amount of destruction that was taking place all around them. They reiterated how the ex-zamindars, in violation of their agreements, and the forest rules

and laws, devastated vast areas of forest land right in front of officials. They also related how the contractors stray outside the contracted coupes, carry loads in excess of their authorized capacity and otherwise exploit both the forests and the tribals.

There is a feeling amongst the tribals that all the arguments in favour of preservation and development of forests are intended to refuse them their demands. They argue that when it is a question of industry, township, development work or projects of rehabilitation, all these plausible arguments are forgotten and vast tracts are placed at the disposal of outsiders who mercilessly destroy the forest wealth with or without necessity.

Already, by the 1960s, reports commissioned by the Government of India were demonstrating the utter failure of the state in providing a life of dignity and honour to its tribal citizens. Nor was this a generalized critique; rather, the specific problems faced by the adivasis were identified—namely, callous and corrupt officials, the loss of land, indebtedness, restrictions on the use of the forest, and large-scale displacement. The evidence offered in these (and other reports) should have called for a course correction, for the formation and implementation of policies that ensured that India's industrial and economic development was not to be at the cost of its adivasi citizens.

That these reports and their recommendations would be met with a deafening silence had not been unanticipated. As the Elwin Committee noted, past reports on tribal problems had been 'ignored in practice'. It 'is extraordinary', it commented, 'how often... a recommendation sinks into the soulless obscurity of an official file and is heard of no more'. Or at least not for another twenty or thirty years. For in the 1980s another series of official reports commented strongly on the continuing deprivation of the adivasis. These were written by the then Commissioner for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, Dr B. D. Sharma, a civil service with wide experience of working with and alongside tribals. As documented by Dr Sharma, the major problems faced by tribals were still land alienation, restrictions on their use of forests, and displacement by dams and other large projects. He pointed out that 'the tribal people are at a critical point in their history...'. They were 'losing command over resources at a very fast rate but are also facing social disorganization which is unprecedented in their history'. And yet the 'tales of woes from tribal areas are hardly heard outside, And when they come they are not taken seriously...'. What was worse, 'the State itself sometimes tends to adopt a partisan role and become a privy even for actions not quite legal simply because the matter concerns voiceless small communities'.

This time, the Government's response to these well documented and soberly worded indictments was to refuse to table the reports in Parliament.

#### IV

Those are some facts about the neglect and exploitation of the adivasis in independent India. Let me turn now to the history of rebellion and disorder. In the colonial period there were major rebellions in tribal areas, as for example the Kol and Bhumj revolts of the early 19th century, the Santhal hool of 1855, the Birsa Munda-led ulugulan in the 1890s, the uprising in Bastar in 1911,

the protests in Gudem-Rampa in the 1920s, and the Warli revolt of 1945-6. Most often, these protests had to do with the alienation of land or the expropriation of forests. They were quelled only with the use of force, often very substantial force.

The first two decades after Independence were, comparatively speaking, a time of peace in tribal India. Perhaps, like Jaipal Singh, most adivasis took the Government at its word that with freedom a new chapter would begin, where 'there is equality of opportunity, where no one would be neglected'. However, as the evidence mounted that the benefits of development were unevenly distributed, and that the costs were borne disproportionately by tribal communities, discontent began to grow. Thus, for example, there was a major uprising of adivasis in Bastar in 1966, led by their recently deposed Maharaja, Pravir Chandra Bhanj Deo. Then, in the 1970s, a militant movement took shape in the tribal districts of Bihar, demanding an end to exploitation by moneylenders and the Forest Department, and asking also for the creation of a separate state to be named 'Jharkhand'. In the same decade, tribals in Maharashtra were organized in defence of their land and forest rights by groups such as the Bhoomi Sena and the Kashtakari Sanghatana. Also in the 1970s, there were the protests against the Koel-Karo projects in Bihar. Then, beginning in the 1980s, and coming down to the present day, the plight of tribals ousted by development projects (and by large dams in particular) has been highlighted by the Narmada Bachao Andolan. Most recently, adivasis threatened by mining projects in Orissa have organized a series of processions and boycotts to reassert their rights over land handed over by the State Government to mining companies.

Above and beyond these various protests, Maoist revolutionaries have been active in tribal areas. The village Naxalbari, which gave the 'Naxalites' their name, itself lies in a part of West Bengal which has a substantial tribal population. Another major centre of Naxalite activity in the late 1960s was the tribal districts of Andhra Pradesh. In the 1970s, the Maoists spread their influence in two main areas—the caste-ridden districts of central Bihar, and the tribal districts of the southern parts of the state. In recent decades, as the Maoist insurgency has spread, its major gains have been in tribal districts—in Maharashtra, in Orissa, in Jharkhand, but above all in Chattisgarh.

Over the past four decades, the adivasis of central India have often expressed their public and collective discontent with the policies and programmes of the state. Their protests have sometimes (as in Bastar in 1966 or in Jharkhand in the late 1970s) taken recourse to traditional means and traditional leaders. At other times (as in Maharashtra in the 1970s, or in the Narmada Andolan), adivasis have been mobilized by social activists from an urban, middle-class, background. More recently, however, tribal disaffection has been largely expressed under the leadership of armed Maoist revolutionaries.

Section II briefly compared the economic and social situation of the Dalits to that of adivasis. When the comparison is extended to the domain of politics, one finds that adivasis appear to be even more disadvantaged. The weakness and vulnerability of adivasis is made even more manifest when one further extends the comparison to include a third marginalized minority—namely, the Muslims.

Consider, for example, the constitution of various Union Cabinets from 1947 to 2007. In this time, there have often been Dalits and Muslims who have held important portfolios. Dalits and/or Muslims have served, sometimes for long periods, as Home Minister, Defence Minister, Agriculture Minister, and External Affairs Minister in the Government of India. On the other hand, no major portfolio in the Union Cabinet has ever been assigned to an adivasi politician.

Likewise, both Dalits and Muslims have held high Constitutional posts. One Dalit and three Muslims have held the highest office of all—that of President of the Republic. One Dalit and three Muslims have served as Chief Justice of India. No tribal has ever been made President or Vice President, or Chief Justice. So far as I know, no adivasi has been appointed a Judge of the Supreme Court. And many more Dalits and Muslims have served as Governors of states than have tribals.

These facts are manifestations of the much wider invisibility of tribals from the political process. Muslims and Dalits have been able to constitute themselves as an interest group on the national stage—they are treated in popular discourse as communities that are pan-Indian. On the other hand, tribal claims remain confined to the states and districts in which they live. Unlike the Dalits and the Muslims, the adivasis continue to be seen only in discrete, broken-up, fragments.

The Dalits, in particular, have effectively channelized their grievances through Constitutional means. They have successful political parties, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party, which is now in power in Uttar Pradesh, and which is rapidly extending its influence and appeal in other states. Dalits also have nationally known leaders, such as the Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Mayawati, who is now being spoken of as a possible future Prime Minister of India. On the other hand, the adivasis have neither a successful political party nor a well-known political leader. Back in the 1940s, a Jharkhand Party was formed under Jaipal Singh's leadership. While it did reasonably well in the first General Elections, in 1952, it remained a regional party. It fought sixty years for a separate state, but its effectiveness was undermined by a series of splits. In any case, when the state of Jharkhand was created in 1998, it consisted only of the tribal districts of Bihar, rather than being, as Jaipal had hoped, a much larger province consisting of the contiguous tribal districts of Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh as well as Bihar. As finally constituted, this 'moth-eaten' Jharkhand has an overwhelming majority of non-tribals.

If, as is commonly (and justly) acknowledged, Dalits and tribals are the two most disadvantaged sections of Indian society, why have the former been more effective in making their claims heard by the formal political system? This contrast is, I believe, largely explained by aspects of

geography and demography. The tribals of central India usually live in tribal villages, in hills and valleys where they outnumber the non-tribals among them. However, in no single state of peninsular India are they in a majority. In Andhra Pradesh, for example, adivasis constitute 6% of the state's population. In Maharashtra, the proportion is 9%; in Rajasthan, 12%. Even in states professedly formed to protect the tribal interest, such as Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, roughly two-thirds of the population is non-tribal.

The Dalits too are a minority in every state, but unlike tribals they live in mixed villages, alongside other castes and communities. This means that when election time comes, they can have a decisive impact even on constituencies not reserved for them. In most states of the Union, and in most districts in these states, they command between 10% and 20% of the vote. Therefore, political parties have to address the Dalit interest in a majority of Lok Sabha and Assembly constituencies. Tribals, on the other hand, can influence elections only in the few, isolated districts where they are concentrated. In a General Election, for example, the tribal vote may matter only in 50 or 60 constituencies, whereas the Dalit vote matters in perhaps as many as 300.

Dalit mobilization on a provincial and national scale is also enabled by the structural similarities in the ways they experience oppression. For the caste system operates in much the same manner across India. In villages in Tamil Nadu as in Uttar Pradesh, Dalits are allotted the most degrading jobs, made to live away from upper-caste hamlets, allowed access only to inferior water sources, and prohibited from entering temples. It is therefore possible for them to build links and forge solidarities horizontally, across villages and districts and states. On the other hand, there are many variations in the forms in which tribals experience oppression. In one place, their main persecutors are forest officials; in another place, moneylenders; in a third, development projects conducted under the aegis of the state; in a fourth, a mining project promoted by a private firm. In the circumstances, it is much harder to build a broad coalition of tribals fighting for a common goal under a single banner.

The Dalits have also been helped by the posthumous presence of Dr B. R. Ambedkar. He has been for them both example and inspiration, a man of towering intellect who successfully breached the upper-caste citadel and who, long after he is gone, encourages his fellows to do likewise. Indeed, the figure of Ambedkar is a rallying point for Dalits across the land.

The tribals, on the other hand, have never had a leader who could inspire admiration, or even affection, across the boundaries of state and language. Birsa Munda, for example, is revered in parts of Jharkhand; but he is scarcely known or remembered in the adivasi areas of Andhra Pradesh or Maharashtra. One advantage that Ambedkar enjoys over tribal icons is that he was a builder of modern institutions as well as a social activist. He burnt copies of the Manu Smṛiti and formed labour unions; but he also founded schools and political parties and, above all, directed the drafting of the Indian Constitution. Ambedkar has become an all-India figure in part because of the similarities in the way his followers experience oppression; but also because they can follow him both in protesting injustice and in building a better future.

One might say that the weak literacy rates among adivasis have been accompanied by a weak ‘articulation ratio’. They do not have national leaders; while such men as do represent them are not conversant enough with the languages and discourses of modern democratic politics. On the other hand, in the case of the Dalits the presence of Ambedkar, in the past, and of Mayawati, in the present, has been complemented by an articulate second rung of activists, who know how to build political networks and lobby within and across parties.

As argued, above, at a national level another minority that has had an significant political impact is the Muslims. Outside the Kashmir Valley, Muslims, like Dalits, live in villages and towns alongside Indians of other creeds. As their depressed economic situation shows, the state has not been especially attentive to their material interest. However, politicians have necessarily to be attentive to their votes. In the last Bihar elections, one leader promised to appoint a Muslim chief minister if his party won. No such promise has ever been made by politicians to tribals, even in states such as Madhya Pradesh where they form as much as one-fifth of the population.

Also relevant to this discussion is the history of Indian nationalism, and in particular the history of the Indian National Congress. Even before Gandhi assumed its leadership, the Congress had to face the charge that it was essentially an upper-caste, Hindu party. To combat this criticism it had to reach out to Muslims and low castes. This imperative became even more pronounced in the Gandhian era, when the Mahatma’s claim that the Congress represented all of India was strongly challenged by M. A. Jinnah, presuming to speak on behalf of the Muslims, and by B. R. Ambedkar, who sought to represent the lowest castes. The rhetoric of Congress nationalism, before and after Independence, always had space within it for the special interests of Muslims and Dalits. (The operative word here is ‘rhetoric’: what happened in practice was another matter.) On the other hand, the Congress has never really understood the distinctive nature of the tribal predicament. Down the decades, matters concerning adivasis have rarely been given prominence in AICC or CWC meetings.

The contrast between a relative Dalit and Muslim visibility on the one hand, and tribal invisibility on the other, can also be illustrated with reference to the mainstream media. Both newspapers and television give a fair amount of coverage to the continuing victimization of Dalits and the continuing marginalization of the Muslims. It is sometimes argued that the coverage of Dalit and Muslim issues in the media is not nearly as nuanced, nor as substantial, as it should be. These criticisms are not without merit. However, in comparison with their adivasi compatriots Dalits and Muslims are actually quite well served by the media. In real life, the tribals are unquestionably as victimized and as marginal; yet they rarely have their concerns discussed or highlighted in talk shows, editorials, reports, or feature articles.

## VI

The increasing presence of Naxalites in areas dominated by adivasis has a geographical reason—namely, that the hills and forests of central India are well suited to the methods of roaming

guerilla warfare. But it also has a historical reason—namely, that the adivasis have gained least and lost most from sixty years of political independence.

In fact, the two are connected. For the state's neglect of the adivasis is in many respects a product of the terrain in which they live. In these remote upland areas, public officials are unwilling to work hard, and often unwilling to work at all. Doctors do not attend the clinics assigned to them; schoolteachers stay away from school; magistrates spend their time lobbying for a transfer back to the plains. On the other hand, the Maoists are prepared to walk miles to hold a village meeting, and listen sympathetically to tribal grievances. As a senior forest official was recently constrained to admit: 'In the absence of any government support and the apathetic attitude of the forest management departments towards the livelihood of forest-dependent communities, the Naxalites have found fertile ground to proliferate...'.

That the Maoists live among, and in the same state of penury as, the tribals, is unquestionable. That some of their actions have sometimes helped the adivasis can also be conceded. This is especially the case with rates for the collection of non-timber forest produce, such as tendu patta, which have gone up by as much 200% in areas where the Naxalites are active and the contractors fearful of their wrath. However, the principal aim of the Maoists is not the social or economic advancement of the adivasis, but the capture of power in Delhi through a process of armed struggle. In this larger endeavour the tribals are a stepping-stone—or, as some would say, merely cannon fodder.

From its origins, the Naxalite movement was riven by internal discord, by sharp and often bloody rivalries between different factions, each claiming itself to be the only true Indian interpreter of Mao Zedong's thought. However, by the end of the last century the Peoples War Group (PWG) and the Maoist Co-ordination Committee (MCC) had emerged as the two groups which still had an functioning organization and a devoted cadre of revolutionary workers. The PWG was very active in Andhra Pradesh, whereas the MCC's base was principally in Bihar.

The Naxalite movement gathered force after the merger in 2004 of the PWG and the MCC. The new party called itself the Communist Party of India (Maoist). That its abbreviation (CPI (M)) mimicked that of a party that had fought and won elections under the Indian Constitution was surely not accidental. We are the real inheritors of the legacy of revolutionary Marxism, the new party was saying, whereas the power-holders in Kerala and West Bengal are merely a bunch of bourgeois reformists.

The new, unified party has been a mere three years in existence, but in that time it has rapidly expanded its influence. The erstwhile MCC cadres have moved southwards into Jharkhand and east into West Bengal. Those who were once with the PWG have travelled into Orissa and Chattisgarh. This last state is where the Maoists have made the most dramatic gains. Large parts of the district of Dantewara, in particular, are under their sway. On one side of the river

Indravati, the Indian state exercises an uncertain control by day and no control at night. On the other side, in what is known as Abujmarh, the state has no presence by day or by night.

Dantewara forms part of a forest belt which spills over from Chattisgarh into Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. The region was known in mythical times as 'Dandakaranya', a name the Maoists have now adopted as their own. Under the Special Zonal Committee for Dandakaranya operate several Divisional Committees. These in turn have Range Committees reporting to them. The lowest level of organization is at the village, where a committee of committed workers is known as a 'Sangam'.

According to a senior functionary of the party, the Sangams in Dantewara seek to protect people's rights in jal, jangal, zameen—water, forest, and land. At the same time, the Maoists make targeted attacks on state officials, especially the police. Raids on police stations are intended to stop them harassing ordinary folk. They are also necessary to augment the weaponry of the guerilla army. Through popular mobilization and the intimidation of state officials, the Maoists hope to expand their authority over Dandakaranya. Once the region is made a 'liberated zone', it is intended to be used as a launching pad for the capture of state power in India as a whole.

How many Maoists are there in India? The estimates are imprecise, and widely varying. There are perhaps between 10,000 and 20,000 full-time guerillas, many of them armed with an AK-47. These revolutionaries are also conversant with the use of grenades, land-mines, and rocket-launchers. They maintain links with guerilla movements in other parts of South Asia, exchanging information and technology with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and, at least before their recent conversion to multi-party democracy, with the Nepali Maoists.

What we know of the leaders and cadres suggests that most Maoists come from a lower middle class background. They usually have a smattering of education, and were often radicalized in college. Like other Communist movements, the leadership of this one too is overwhelmingly male. No tribals are represented in the upper levels of the party hierarchy.

The General Secretary of the now unified party, the Communist Party of India (Maoist), calls himself 'Ganapathi'. He is believed to be from Andhra Pradesh, although the name he uses is almost certainly a pseudonym. Statements carrying his name occasionally circulate on the Internet—one, issued in February 2007, reported the 'successful completion' of a party Congress 'held deep in the forests of one of the several Guerilla Zones in the country...'. The party Congress 'reaffirmed the general line of the new democratic revolution with agrarian revolution as its axis and protracted people's war as the path of the Indian revolution...'. The meeting 'was completed amongst great euphoria with a Call to the world people: Rise up as a tide to smash Imperialism and its running dogs! Advance the Revolutionary war throughout the world!'

In pursuit of this 'protracted people's war', the Maoists have conducted daring attacks on artefacts and symbols of the state. In November 2005, they stormed the district town of



Jehanabad in Bihar, firebombing offices and freeing several hundred prisoners from jail. In March 2007, they attacked a police camp in Chattisgarh, killing fifty-five policemen and making off with a huge cache of weapons. At other times, they have bombed and set fire to railway stations and transmission towers.

However, the violence promoted by the revolutionaries is not always aimed at the state. A land mine they set off in Gadchiroli in May 2006 killed many members of a wedding party. The Maoists have also maimed and murdered those they suspect of being 'informers'.

## VII

How can a democratic state fight the rise of Maoist extremism in the tribal areas? It might do so, on the one hand, by bringing the fruits of development to the adivasi, and on the other hand by prompt and effective police action. However, the policies currently being followed by the Government of India are the antitheses of what one would prescribe. Instead of making tribals partners in economic development, they marginalize them further. State governments, themselves run and dominated by non-tribals, are signing away tribal land for mining, manufacturing, and energy generation projects. And instead of efficient police action we have the outsourcing of law and order, as in the Salwa Judum campaign in Chattisgarh, where the State Government has set up a vigilante army that runs a parallel administration in the region.

In the most peaceful of times the state has often failed to uphold the law in tribal areas. Schedules V and VI of the Constitution provide for a substantial degree of self-governance in districts where adivasis are in a majority. Yet their clauses protecting tribal rights in land and forests, curbing the activities of money-lenders, and mandating the formation of village and district councils have been honoured only in the breach. These Schedules provide for local councils to share in the royalties from minerals found on tribal land; what happens in practice is that the adivasis do not get to see or spend a paisa from mining, whose proceeds are shared between the contractors and the state-level (and usually non-tribal) politicians. Meanwhile, the criminal justice system is in a state of near collapse; as witness the murder of Shankar Guha Niyogi, that selfless striver for the rights and dignity of adivasi workers in Chattisgarh. It was widely believed that Guha Niyogi was killed by assassins hired by capitalists; yet those who planned and executed the murder have gone scot-free.

Even with this kind of record, Salwa Judum marks a new low. In the past, the state failed to sincerely uphold the law of the land in tribal areas; but now it has gone so far as to actively promote disorder and lawlessness. The impact of Salwa Judum in the Dantewara district of Chattisgarh has been studied by several fact-finding committees composed of activists, academics, journalists, and retired civil servants. Their reports have demonstrated that the campaign has led to an escalation of violence. On the one side, Salwa Judum cadres have burnt villages and abused women; on the other, Naxalites have attacked and killed those they see as working in the service of the state. An atmosphere of fear and insecurity pervades the district.

Families and villages are divided, some living with or in fear of the Maoists, others in fear of or in roadside camps controlled by the Salwa Judum. As many as fifty thousand people have been displaced from their homes. These tribal refugees live in a pitiable condition, in tents exposed to the elements, and with no access to health care or gainful employment. Thousands of others have fled across the border into Andhra Pradesh.

In the district of Dantewara a civil conflict is under way, which threatens to turn into a civil war. With a veil of secrecy surrounding the operations of the state and the revolutionaries, and with the adivasis too scared to file First Information Reports, there are no reliable estimates of the casualties in this war. Perhaps between five hundred and a thousand people have died unnatural deaths in Dantewara in the past year alone. Among those killed or murdered, some are security personnel and others are Naxalites. However, the vast majority are tribals caught in the cross-fire.

Ironically, by arming civilians, the state has merely reproduced the methods of the other side. For tribal boys in their teens have joined Salwa Judum for much the same reason as other boys had previously joined the Naxalites. Educated just enough to harbour a certain disenchantment for labouring in field and forest, but not enough to be absorbed with honour in the modern economy, these boys were enticed by the state into a job which paid them a salary (albeit a meagre one—Rs 1500 a month), and gave them a certain status in society. Gun in hand, they now strut around the countryside, forcing those without weapons to fall in line.

In this manner, the machismo of revolution is being answered by the machismo of counter-revolution. Call them Sangam Organizer or Special Police Officer, the young men of Dandakaranya have been seduced by their new-found—and essentially unearned—authority. In the Dantewara district alone, there are now several thousand young males punch-drunk with the power which, as Mao said, flows from the barrel of a gun.

There is thus a double tragedy at work in tribal India. The first tragedy is that the state has treated its adivasi citizens with contempt and condescension. The second tragedy is that their presumed protectors, the Naxalites, offer no long term solution either.

Can the Communist Party of India (Maoist) come to power in New Delhi through armed struggle? I think the answer to this question must be in the negative. Corrupt and corroded though it is, the Indian state, c. 2007, cannot be compared to the Chinese state, c. 1940s. It is highly unlikely that a revolution based on Maoist principles will succeed in India. In fact I would say it is impossible. In dense jungle, the Maoists can easily elude a police force that is poorly trained, poorly equipped, and running scared to boot. It is not inconceivable that they will, at some stage, manage to establish a 'liberated zone' in some part of Dandakaranya. But once they seek to expand their revolution into more open country, they will be mowed down by the Indian Army.

Of the commitment of the Maoists to their cause there should be no doubt. These are young men (and occasionally women) who have lived for years on end in the most difficult circumstances, in pursuit of their dream of a successful revolution. I believe that, in military terms, this dream is a fantasy. The Maoists will never be able to plant the Red Flag on the Red Fort. The tragedy is that it might take them years to come to this conclusion. While the Maoists will find it difficult to expand outside their current areas of operation, the Indian state will not be able to easily restore order and legitimacy in the tribal areas that have passed out of its grasp. A war of attrition lies ahead of us, which will take a heavy toll of human life—lives of policemen, of Maoists, and of unaffiliated civilians.

Such is the prospect in the short-term. From the longer-term perspective of the historian, however, the Maoist dream might be seen not as fantasy but as nightmare. For the signal lesson of the twentieth century is that regimes based on one-party rule grossly violate human dignity and human welfare. By common consent, the most evil man of the modern age was Adolf Hitler. The holocaust he unleashed and the wars he provoked cost some thirty million lives. But in the mass murder stakes, Stalin and Mao are not far behind. In fact, some estimates suggest that revolutionary communism has claimed even more human lives than fascism and the extremist ideologies of the right.

That multi-party democracy is, if not the best, certainly the least harmful political system devised by humans is appreciated by some adivasis themselves. On a visit to Dantewara in the summer of 2006, I had a long conversation with a Muria tribal. He was a first generation literate, who had been sent to study in an ashram school across the river. After graduation he returned to his native village, to teach in the school there. At the same time he obtained a B. A. degree through correspondence. A teacher, if he does his job well, is among the most respected men in rural India. This Muria teacher was that, but when the Maoists came to his village he experienced an abrupt fall in status and authority. For in their eyes he was an official of the Indian state, and thus subject to harassment and extortion.

Last year, at the age of twenty-five, the Muria teacher fled the village of his forefathers and crossed the Indravati into the sarkari side of the district. His qualifications allowed him to get a job in a still functioning school. He lived near where he worked, at first in a tent, and then in a house built by himself on government land. In fact, I first came across the Muria teacher while he was painting the walls of his home, pail in one hand, brush in the other.

A slim, dark man with a moustache, clad in a simple lungi, the Muria teacher talked to me while his two little children played around him. He told me that when the Maoists had first come to the district, they were full of idealism and good intentions. Over time, however, they had been corrupted, turning from defenders of the tribals to their tormentors. I answered that we could say the same of the Salwa Judum. It may have once been a people's movement, but it had since been taken over by contractors and criminals, these mostly non-tribal. We argued the point, back and forth, while a crowd of interested parties gathered. Finally, the Muria teacher said that while he

could contest what I was saying in public, and in front of other people, among the Maoists such free exchange of views was simply impermissible. As he put it: ‘Naxalion ko hathiyar chhodné aur janta ké samné baath-cheeth karné ki himmat nahin hai’.

Indeed, the Indian Maoists do not have the courage to put down their arms and state their case openly before the people.

How then might the Maoist insurgency be ended or at least contained? On the Government side, this might take the shape of a sensitively conceived and sincerely implemented plan to make adivasis true partners in the development process: by assuring them the title over lands cultivated by them, by allowing them the right to manage forests sustainably, by giving them a solid stake in industrial or mining projects that come up where they live and at the cost of their homes.

On the Maoist side, this might take the shape of a compact with bourgeois democracy. They could emulate the CPI and the CPM, as well as their counterparts in Nepal, by participating in and perhaps even winning elections. Comrade Prachanda appears to recognize that the political ideology most appropriate to the twenty-first century is multi-party democracy. Admittedly, the cadres in Nepal are yet to disarm. Yet a reconciliation of extremism with electoral democracy seems even more urgent and necessary in a country like India, which is much larger and much more diverse than Nepal.

As things stand, however, one cannot easily see the Indian Maoists give up on their commitment to armed struggle. Nor, given the way the Indian state actually functions, can one see it so radically reform itself as to put the interests of a vulnerable minority—the adivasis—ahead of those with more money and political power.

In the long run, perhaps, the Maoists might indeed make their peace with the Republic of India, and the Republic come to treat its adivasi citizens with dignity and honour. Whether this denouement will happen in my own lifetime I am not sure. In the forest regions of central and eastern India, years of struggle and strife lie ahead. Here, in the jungles and hills they once called their own, the tribals will continue to be harassed on one side by the state and on the other by the insurgents. As one Bastar adivasi put it to me—‘Hummé dono taraf sé dabav hain, aour hum beech mé pis gayé hain’. It sounds far tamer in English—‘Pressed and pierced from both sides, here we are, crushed in the middle’.

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Report of the Committee on Special Multipurpose Tribal Blocks, pp 191-2.

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For a general overview, see A. R. Desai, editor, *Agrarian Struggles in India Since Independence* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986). On Bastar, see Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns*; on Jharkhand, Susan B. C. Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992), and Nirmal Sengupta, editor, *Jharkhand: Fourth World Dynamics* (Delhi: Authors Guild, 1982); on the Narmada Andolan, Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Adivasi Battles over 'Development' in the Narmada Valley* (second edition: New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004). The mining conflicts in Orissa are the subject of a forthcoming book by Felix Padel.

The early phase of the Maoist movement in India is ably treated in Sumanta Banerjee, *In the Wake of Naxalbari: A History of the Naxalite Movement in India* (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1980). There is, as yet, no comparable work on Maoism as it has evolved in the 1990s and beyond.

In the remainder of this essay I use 'tribal' and 'adivasi' interchangeably, as also 'Maoist' and 'Naxalite'.

These estimates are not offered on the basis of a scientific study, but are an educated guess. A detailed statistical analysis of individual constituencies would of course revise these figures upwards or downwards, but I suspect by not very much.

Notably, while they have made major gains in states such as Jharkhand and Chattisgarh, the Naxalites have no real influence in the western adivasi belt—that is, in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan, where the populations are more closely integrated with caste peasant society, and where the terrain is much less suited to guerilla action.

Of course, it is not merely in tribal areas that the Naxalites are active. For instance, they have a strong presence in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh, and in central Bihar. In both areas they work chiefly with sharecroppers and agricultural labourers of low caste origin, mobilizing them in opposition to the upper caste moneylenders and landlords. (Cf Bela Bhatia, 'The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9th April 2005.) However, in recent years their greatest gains appear to have been in districts where adivasis are in a majority. In any case, this essay's focus on the tribal predicament means that it necessarily has to give short shrift to Naxalite activity in areas where the principal axes of social identification are caste and class.

D. Mukherji, 'If You Look After Forest People, You Kill Naxalism', *The Asian Age*, 28 June 2005.

These paragraphs are based on an interview conducted in Bastar in the summer of 2006, with a Maoist leader calling himself 'Sanjeev'.

See, among other works, Peoples Union for Democratic Rights, *When the State Makes War on its own People: A Report on the Violation of People's Rights during the Salwa Judum Campaign in Dantewada, Chattisgarh* (New Delhi: PUDR, April 2006); Independent Citizens's Initiative, *War in the Heart of India: An Enquiry into the Ground Situation in Dantewara District, Chattisgarh* (New Delhi: ICI, July 2006)

Cf Robert Service, *Comrades: A World History of Communism* (London: Macmillan, 2007).

The arguments in this essay were first presented in a series of talks across the country in the first months of 2007—in the 'Challenges to Democracy' series organized by and at the Nehru Centre, Mumbai (January); as the seventh ISRO-Satish Dhawan lecture at the Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research in Bangalore (also in January); as the annual lecture of the Raja Rammohun Roy Foundation in Jaipur (February); and as the first Rajiv Kapur Memorial Lecture at the India International Centre, New Delhi (March). I am grateful to the audience at these lectures for their questions and comments. The present text has also benefited from the comments and criticisms of Rukun Advani, David Hardiman, Sujata Keshavan, J. Martinez-Alier, Mahesh Rangarajan, and Dilip Simeon. I am especially indebted to Nandini Sundar, from whose work on adivasis I have learnt a great deal over the years. The usual disclaimers apply.

## ADIVASIS, NAXALITES, AND INDIAN DEMOCRACY

by Ramachandra Guha

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## PLURALISM IN THE INDIAN UNIVERSITY

### **Economic and Political Weekly**

Earlier this year, the National Archives mounted an exhibition on the founding of the first modern universities in India. A Kolkata newspaper gave its report on this exhibition the headline: 'The Other Revolution of 1857'. This was apt, for the founding of these universities was indeed a revolution, and indeed also the 'other' to the better known revolution of 1857. Call it by whatever name, a sepoy mutiny or a war of independence, that uprising was essentially reactionary, looking back to a period before the white man set foot in the sub-continent. On the other hand, the revolution set in motion by the universities was essentially progressive, looking forward to a time when the white man would finally leave the sub-continent.

Founded in 1857, the universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras were the crucible of modernity in India. As André Bételle has written, these universities 'opened new horizons both

intellectually and institutionally in a society that had stood still in a conservative and hierarchical mould for centuries'. These universities were 'among the first open and secular institutions in a society that was governed largely by the rules of kinship, caste and religion'. Thus 'the age-old restrictions of gender and caste did not disappear in the universities, but they came to be questioned there'.

The universities were also a crucible of nationalism. It was there that young men and women learnt to question the logic of colonial rule, to hold up, as a mirror to their rulers, the British ideals of liberty and justice that were haphazardly upheld at home and comprehensively denied in the colonies. Gandhi and Ambedkar had their early education under the auspices of the Bombay University, C. R. Das and Subhas Chandra Bose under the auspices of the Calcutta University, C. Rajagopalachari and C. Subramaniam under the auspices of the Madras University. Tens of thousands of more 'ordinary' freedom fighters were also educated—in all senses of the word—by their time in these universities or in other universities set up in the period of colonial rule—such as those in Allahabad, Punjab, Banaras and Aligarh. These soldiers of non-violence, who defied their family and sacrificed their careers to fill the jails on Gandhi's call, came from all sections of society. They were high caste as well as low caste, men as well as women, Hindu and Sikh as well as Muslim and Christian.

It is not just that the Indian university trained those who led and manned the freedom struggle. It was also that they trained those who led and manned the creation of a modern, democratic, nation-state. For no new nation was born in more difficult circumstances—against the backdrop of civil war and privation, with eight million refugees to be resettled, and 500 princely states to be integrated. That a nation was forged out of these fragments, and that this was henceforth governed on the basis of a democratic Constitution, was a miracle—and not a minor one. This miracle was the handiwork of a group of visionary leaders—with Nehru, Patel and Ambedkar preeminent among them—aided by thousands of now forgotten civil servants, lawyers, doctors, teachers, social workers and soldiers, a majority of whom were shaped and formed by the Indian university system.

That 'system' was, and is, based on constituent colleges. The nurturers of nationalism and the nation-state were educated as much in these colleges as in the universities of which they were part. Places such as Presidency College, Calcutta; Presidency College, Madras; Elphinstone College, Bombay; St. Stephen's College, Delhi; Government College, Lahore; Patna College, Patna; and Maharaja's College, Mysore, have all contributed in ways large and small to the shaping of modern India.

It behooves us to recognize (and salute) the role played by our universities and colleges in nurturing Indian nationalism and building Indian democracy. But, since we live in the present, we must also admit that the state of our universities (and colleges) is not what it could and might be. I myself live in what is claimed to be the capital of India's 'knowledge economy', yet the university that my city houses is less than distinguished. And the university that carries the name



of the city in which this journal is published is not exactly in the pink of health either. In these respects the universities of Bangalore and Mumbai fairly represent the state of universities in the country as a whole.

## II

I have long believed that while India is sometimes the most exasperating country in the world, it is at all times the most interesting. By the same token, if Mumbai is sometimes the most exasperating city in India, it is at all times the most interesting. The reasons in both cases, and for both characteristics, are the same. They lie in the unparalleled diversity of this particular country and this particular city. Which other land can match India in its mix of different castes, classes, languages, faiths, forms of dress, cuisines, musical styles, et. al.? And which other Indian city can remotely come close to Mumbai in containing, within its capacious hold, representative examples of these varied cultures and lifestyles?

For the scholar or writer, at his desk or in his ivory tower, the diversity of human forms is perennially interesting. For the citizen living life on the ground, however, it can at times be deeply exasperating. When people of one habit or temperament—or ideology or social custom—are placed close to people of another, they tend sometimes—oftentimes?—to react with prejudice and suspicion, this sometimes—oftentimes?—manifesting itself in conflict and combat, whether intellectual or physical, individual or institutional. Life would be altogether less discordant if everyone around us spoke and thought and dressed and ate just as we did. But altogether less interesting.

Broadly, there have been two responses of political leaders to the prevalence or persistence of social and cultural diversity. The first has been to flatten it, to try and make citizens as alike as one another in the ways they think and speak and live. Or at least in the important ways—such as religion or language or political ideology. The second response has been to permit citizens their own individual ways of living, while crafting institutions that allow them to collaborate and co-exist.

Fortunately, the men and women who built modern India chose the second path. They did not follow Israel or Pakistan in fusing faith with state by granting special privileges to citizens of one religion. They did not follow Germany or the United States in making it mandatory for all citizens to speak one language. And they did not follow Soviet Russia and Communist China in constructing a single-party state.

At least in theory, the Indian nation-state is the most plural on earth. It demands less conformity among its citizens than every other state we know. The practice of pluralism is another matter. At various points in Indian history, vast influence has been exercised by those who would seek to make one religion (Hinduism), one language (Hindi), one party (the Congress), or even one family (the Nehru-Gandhi) dominant over the other religions, languages, parties, and families of India.

The theory and practice of pluralism in (and by) the Indian nation is a fascinating subject. So is the theory and practice of pluralism in the states and cities of India. Take the city this journal is printed in, whose social diversity is reflected most immediately in the different names we know it by. There is, of course, a Maharashtrian Mumbai, but also an Anglo-Indian Bombay, as well as a Hindustani Bumbai. But this is also in some part a Gujarati city, also a Tamil city and a Kannadiga city. Every linguistic group in India is richly represented here, as is every religious community and political ideology. At the same time, Mumbai is the capital of a state formed to protect the interests of a single linguistic group. What are the tensions this creates in the lives and labours of the citizens of Mumbai/Bombay/Bumbai?

The linguistic division of India has worked very well—for India as a whole. There has been friction at the edges, conflicts about towns and villages on the border, and about riparian rights, but had these states not been created I believe the conflicts would have been much more serious. Consider the examples of Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the first of which broke up and the second of which is mired in an apparently unending civil war largely because one community sought to impose a single language on the nation. When, in 1956, Sinhala was made the single official language of Ceylon (as Sri Lanka was then known), a left-wing M. P. presciently warned that ‘two torn little bleeding states might yet arise out of one little state’. If a single language had been imposed on all of India—as the Hindi zealots wanted—this massive country might have been torn apart into fifteen large and bleeding states.

So, without question, linguistic pluralism has strengthened Indian unity. But how does this diversity of language groups play itself out within a state, rather than in the country as a whole? As residents of Mumbai/Bombay/Bumbai know all too well, diversity has sometimes produced sharp conflicts. If Mumbai is the capital of the state of Maharashtra, some ask, why must so many of the best or most lucrative jobs be taken by those whose mother tongue is not Marathi? These ‘outsiders’ answer that the Constitution of India grants all its citizens the right to live and work anywhere in the Union. For forty years now this debate has raged in Mumbai. It is now making itself heard in my native Bangalore, likewise the capital of a state based on language, likewise a city where the wealthy and powerful mostly do not speak the local tongue. Here, too, the conflict has manifested itself in the city’s renaming, with ‘Bangalore’ becoming ‘Bengulooru’.

### III

Diversity is a social condition; it is what India is. Pluralism is a political programme; it is a manifestation of what we wish India to be. At the level of the nation, the practice of pluralism poses one set of challenges; at the level of the city or state, yet another. What then, of the university? What are the varieties of pluralism that a university in India must seek to foster? In my view, these are principally of five kinds:

First, the university must foster pluralism in the student body. There must be students of all ages; from those in their late teens to those in their early thirties (or even beyond). One way to do this is to have, within a single campus, programmes running all the way from the B. A. or B. Sc. right up to the Ph D. There must be many women students; in the ideal situation, 50% or more. Students from low caste and working class backgrounds must be adequately represented; so also those from minority religions. Finally, a university is made more Indian if it can attract students from other states of the Union.

Second, the university must foster pluralism in the teaching staff. Like the students, these must be both women and men, who come from different classes, castes, and religious groupings. And—this is even more crucial here—from different parts of India. But—unlike in the case of students—it is not enough that the teachers come from different social backgrounds. They must also have diverse intellectual credos. Some must prefer abstract theoretical work; others, research that is more applied in nature. Since scholars are also citizens, university teachers have political beliefs; but these, again, must be of varied kinds. A university where all the teachers were Communists, or all of them Shiv Sainiks, would be a very boring place indeed.

Third, the university must offer a plurality of disciplines. It should have at least some—if not all—undergraduate colleges which offer degrees in the sciences as well as the humanities. There must be graduate programmes in the major disciplines—mathematics, economics, history, political science, physics, chemistry, biology, literature, etc.—but also professional schools offering degrees in law, medicine, and business as well as—ideally—faculties of fine arts and music. At the same time, the university must have the flexibility—and imagination—to create new departments when scientific progress or social developments oblige it to do so.

Fourth, a university must foster a pluralism of approaches within a discipline. Its department of economics must have Friedmanites and Keynesians as well as Marxists. Its department of biology should have space for experimentalists who splice genes, for Darwinians who study speciation, and for fieldworkers who live with animals in the wild. A university department all of whose members were wedded to one particular theoretical—or experimental—approach would be a very boring place indeed.

As Max Weber pointed out, unlike political parties or religious seminaries universities are ‘not institutions for the inculcation of absolute or ultimate moral values’. Put less politely, universities must not be allowed to become vehicles of indoctrination, promoting a particular political or religious point of view. They teach the student ‘facts, their conditions, laws and interrelations’, serving in this manner to ‘sharpen the student’s capacity to understand the actual conditions of his own exertions...’. However, ‘what ideals the [student] should serve—“what gods he must bow before”—these they require him to deal with on his own responsibility, and ultimately in accordance with his own conscience’.

This pluralism of methodological and theoretical approaches must be promoted at various levels: that of the university as a whole, by each of its constituent departments, and by each individual teacher as well. A century ago, in words that seem strikingly contemporary, Max Weber deplored the tendency of some professors 'of educating their students into certain political beliefs and ultimate outlooks'. He was himself clear that the university teacher 'is under the sternest obligation to avoid proposing his own position in the struggle of ideals. He must make his chair into a forum where the understanding of ultimate standpoints—alien to and diverging from his own—is fostered, rather than into an arena where he propagates his own ideals'.

Fifth, a university must encourage a pluralism of funding sources. It must not rely only on state patronage, but raise money from fees, from its alumni, and from private corporations. By diversifying its portfolio, so to speak, the university reduces its dependence on a single source of patronage, while also engaging with (and making itself relevant to) a wider swathe of society.

Stated in this straightforward manner, these ends seem self-evident. Surely any self-respecting university will always be plural in all these ways? Not, perhaps, in India, where one cannot say with confidence that any of our universities have met these ideals wholly or consistently. However, at various points in history, one Indian university or another has been plural in one or other of these ways. As André Bêteille has noted, it took six hundred years for Oxford or Cambridge to admit women, whereas Calcutta and Bombay admitted them from their inception. They also provided avenues of upward mobility for the lower castes: in the traditional system an Untouchable like B. R. Ambedkar would have been condemned to a life of illiteracy. Those from minority religions also got, and took, their chances—some of the finest scholars and teachers in the history of Mumbai University have been Parsi and Muslim.

Likewise, there have been splendid examples of Indian universities promoting diversity in the social background of its teachers, and of these teachers in turn promoting a diversity of intellectual approaches. Determined to make Calcutta University more than a home for Bengalis, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee appointed C. V. Raman and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan to chairs when they were young and unrecognized—which Sir Ashutosh did not care about—but also talented and hardworking—which he appreciated. Raman and Radhakrishnan eventually moved on to other pastures, but a contemporary of theirs who stayed in Calcutta was the Malayali from Merton, Kuruvilla Zachariah, among whose students at Presidency College were many future leaders of free India.

Third, many Indian universities have been inclusive in a disciplinary sense. The pattern was set by the three founding universities, which all had departments of science and social science, as well as a faculty of law and a school of medicine. Thus in the 1930s and 40s, Bombay University was perhaps best known, on the research side, for its School of Economics and Sociology; while for the past half century that honour has consistently been held by the University Department of Chemical Technology.

Fourth, the best university departments in India have promoted a variety of intellectual approaches. The longtime head of the sociology department in Bombay, G. S. Ghurye, was a bookish conservative; yet among the students he sent out into the world were the superb ethnographer M. N. Srinivas and the Marxist theoretician A. R. Desai. Srinivas, in turn, bestrode the Delhi University department of sociology like a colossus; in turn, he did not impose his methodological preferences on those he taught or guided. Srinivas had little interest in comparative sociology, or in the industrial working class, or in the Sanskritic tradition; yet three of his distinguished students were to make these subjects their own.

It is with the fifth kind of pluralism that the record is most disappointing. The Indian university has relied too heavily on subsidies and hand-outs from the state. Middle-class and even rich students pay the same fees as the poorer students; in effect, almost no fees. There has been little attempt to tap the generosity of alumni—even the most prosperous ones. Few universities cultivate active links with the private sector or with philanthropic foundations.

Pluralism is one important ideal of the Indian university; it is not, of course, the only one. A university must also have an institutional cohesiveness, that allows it to reproduce itself regardless of the particular individuals who lead or staff it. Again, a university must have a particular and recognizable character, that encourages its students, staff, faculty, and alumni to identify with it. And it must set standards of academic excellence consistent with those in the nation and the world, and it must continually strive to maintain them.

These ends might not always be mutually compatible. Thus, in one particular case or another—say the recruitment of students from under-represented social groups or the appointment of a new Dean—pluralism might conflict with institutional efficiency, or efficiency in turn conflict with academic excellence. Compromises have to be made, judgement calls taken. It would be foolish not to recognize that a public university serves multiple ends, and that these may sometimes be in conflict. That said, the varieties of pluralism enumerated above are, I believe, among the most important ends an Indian university should strive to fulfil.

#### IV

In the history of the Indian university, the forces favouring pluralism have had to contend with the opposing forces of parochialism. These are ever present, often powerful, and sometimes overwhelming.

One form of parochialism is identity politics. Particularly in staff appointments, the claims of caste or region or religion can play as significant a role as academic qualification or distinction. Often, the candidate with the best connections gets the job rather than the best candidate. And so ‘the disputes that now dominate many if not most of our universities are not over the principles and methods of science and scholarship; they are over pay and promotion and the distribution of seats and posts among different castes, communities, and factions’.

A second form of parochialism is ideological. When the NDA Government was in power in New Delhi, there was much criticism of the role played by the HRD Minister, Murali Manohar Joshi, in placing, in important posts, intellectuals more amenable to his own political ideology. The criticism was just—it would have been more just still if it had acknowledged that in this respect Joshi was merely following the lead of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which, in both West Bengal and Kerala, has consistently interfered with university appointments. No critic of Marxism stands a chance of becoming Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University, for example.

A third form of parochialism is institutional. There is, in almost every Indian university, a marked tendency to employ one's own graduates to teaching positions. This in-breeding has infected even the best departments in the best universities. Thus the History Department in the Jawaharlal Nehru University and the Sociology Department in the Delhi University are largely staffed by those who have, at some stage or another, passed through the same portals as students.

Whether based on identity or ideology or institution, these varieties of parochialism have had a corrosive effect on university life. They have undermined the quality of teaching, narrowed the range of subjects taught, and polluted the general intellectual ambience. By now, they have collectively impacted millions of Indians, who have got a more limited education than they hoped for, or, indeed, deserved.

Provincialism apart, there are other hurdles to the fostering of a plural ethos in the Indian university. One is short-sighted public policy. In the colonial period, the best science in India was done in the universities: by men such as C. V. Raman and Satyen Bose in Calcutta; Meghnad Saha and K. S. Krishnan in Allahabad; T. R. Seshadri in Delhi; and K. Venkataraman in Bombay. However, at Independence the decision was taken to set up a series

of laboratories under the auspices of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR). It was made clear that these would be the favoured sites for research, and that the universities would focus mostly on teaching. The best talent drifted away to these prestige institutes, impoverishing the universities. On the other side, without the challenge and stimulation of students, laboratory science got steadily more bureaucratic, and did not deliver on its promises either.

In any case, in the Indian context what C. P. Snow called the 'two cultures'—the humanistic and the scientific—always had an uneasy relationship. Almost from the beginnings of modern education, Indian men were brought up to believe that the 'arts' were inferior to the 'sciences'. Even in universities where the two co-existed, science students or professors scarcely came into contact with their counterparts in the humanities. After Independence, apart from the CSIR the creation of the Indian Institutes of Technology also contributed to the further moving apart of the two cultures. Although the IIT's had departments of humanities, their concerns were integrated in a desultory way into the curriculum. The precedent had been set, well before, by the Indian Institute of Science, whose original charter (influenced by its visionary founder, Jamsetji Tata)

had room for a department of social science, which, however, remains to be activated a century after the Institute's founding. And so the finest young minds in the sciences have been encouraged to cultivate an indifference (and even contempt) to the social sciences and to history.

The plural ambitions of the Indian university have also been severely tested by a now rampant populism. I have in mind the widespread suspicion of what are termed 'elite' departments and 'elite' universities. There is continuous pressure towards the equalization of resources, so that the public pie is shared equally by institutions good and bad, old and new. Institutions that were intended to be small and select are urged to let in more and more students, regardless of whether they can maintain standards while doing so. Where institutions of excellence should serve as a benchmark towards which others can aspire, they are instead asked to come down to the level of the lowest. In this manner, policies conducted in the name of democracy and egalitarianism serve only to degrade the education system as a whole.

These prejudices sometimes operate within a single university. Thus the Delhi School of Economics has long attracted widespread (and, for the most part, undeserved) opprobrium. Professors in other departments resented its international reputation; actually a product of intellectual excellence and an institutional culture of team-work, but in the eyes of its critics a consequence of Western-oriented 'elitism'. Successive Vice Chancellors sought to erode its autonomy and bring it on par with, or down to the level of, the other departments of the University. Teaching vacancies were unfilled, sometimes for years upon end. Proposals to reform syllabi were held up. The end result could have been foretold; the Delhi School no longer has an international reputation.

A final hurdle is constituted by the invisible hand of the market. Universities work best when they have an integrated campus, bringing together undergraduate colleges, postgraduate departments of the arts and sciences, and professional schools, thus allowing the students and teachers of these different units to mingle with and learn from one another. Among the major universities of India only Delhi even remotely approximates this ideal. The reason for this is that a large chunk of territory was set aside for it when the new capital of British India was being planned. As the university expanded, the new colleges that sought affiliation had to be located elsewhere, but by then the campus itself had a sufficient density of institutions to have a character of its own. It was also close enough to the city to be connected to it. On the other hand, the universities of our other metros, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Bangalore, grew in a random fashion, so that their constituent units were far-flung and in no real contact. Since the price of real estate forbids the consolidation of these units, the undergraduate colleges remain isolated from one another and from the postgraduate departments; even the latter are often fragmented, spread unit by unit across the city. Some universities, for example Bangalore, then thought to construct a new campus in land available on the outskirts. The postgraduate departments were relocated here, with the undergraduate colleges staying where they were. This new campus has only served to further separate the university from the city whose name it carries and of which it is presumed to be an integral part.

Rising property prices have inhibited the growth of university pluralism in another respect; by making it very hard for Indians to study or teach in parts of India far from their own. In about 1940, a modest apartment could be rented in Mumbai at about 20% of a professor's salary; by about 1970 this figure might have jumped to 50%. Now it must be close to, or even in excess of, 100%. What this means is that the pool of available teachers has steadily shrunk; it now contains only those who have homes in the city itself. The consequences of this for the quality of intellectual life in the university are depressingly obvious.

The market works in mysterious ways. On the one hand, it has discouraged the movement of students and teachers within India; on the other hand, it has encouraged their movement to distant parts of the globe. In the 1960s and 1970s, large numbers of Indian scientists studied and then found employment in Western universities; now, they are increasingly joined by social scientists, historians and literary scholars, the trade in whom is especially brisk in the American academy, to meet the demands of the growing Indian diaspora and the new-found fashions of 'postcolonial' studies. Once, names such as Ghosh, Mukherjee, Srinivasan and Reddy were quite common in the payroll of the universities of Mumbai and Puné; now, they are more likely to be found in the faculty web pages of the universities of Minnesota and Chicago.

The influence of parochialism and populism on our universities is, in part, a consequence of the clash or contradiction between two varieties of pluralism. For the survival of the Republic of India it was perhaps necessary to create linguistic states, so as to inhibit the dominance of one language group over the others. However, this enactment of a plural politics at the level of the nation as a whole has sometimes led to a denial of pluralism at lower levels. This is particularly true in the state sector, where one can manipulate recruitment in a manner that the private sector forbids. Since an overwhelming majority of our universities are managed by State Governments, they are particularly prone to local or regional chauvinism.

Ideally, a university would not want to be parochial even at the level of the nation-state. The best Western universities seek to draw students and faculty from all over the world. Such was also the original intention of Rabindranath Tagore's university, as witness the name 'Viswabharati'. That our universities become more international in their composition may be too much to hope for, but let us at least try and make them adequately Indian.

## V

Writing in 1968, the sociologist Edward Shils singled out student unrest as a major threat to the proper functioning of universities in India. Shils observed that Indian students had been restive in the 1930s and 1940s as well, but that this had found a focus and a constructive outlet through the independence movement. In the 1960s, however, student protest was directionless; it was, in fact, a form of 'juvenile delinquency'. Indian student agitation, wrote Shils, was 'demoralizing and degrading the academic profession which is already in a worse situation than one cares to see'. If unchecked, student unrest would disrupt more than the universities—'if they go on, they will



demoralize the Indian police services and render them incompetent to maintain public order or they will precipitate harsher repression resulting in many deaths which will in turn place very heavy strains on the Indian political system’.

These predictions were not entirely falsified. A few years later, students across India found a focus in the JP movement, which did in fact ‘precipitate harsher repression’ as well as the heavy strain on the Indian political system known as the Emergency. Still, it would be unfair to blame the general deterioration of our institutions of higher education solely or even primarily on discontented students. Indian universities have been undermined from above rather than degraded from below, corrupted and corroded by the forces of parochialism and populism itemized in this essay.

This writer is not the first to comment on the dangers of parochialism in the university—nor, to be sure, will he be the last. In September 1962—a month before war broke out between India and China—a group of liberal intellectuals met in Bombay to discuss the prospects for ‘a national university’. The convenor of the symposium, the mathematician A. B. Shah, pointed to the ‘growing regionalization of the universities under the pressures of a developing multilingual society’. This ‘process of regionalization’, he continued, ‘is accompanied by increasing fragmentation of the intellectual élite and a weakening of the university tradition, which was never very strong in India’. Shah felt that the solution lay in ‘the creation of a few national universities that would keep the tradition of the university alive till experience makes men re-examine the wisdom of what they have done’. He identified likely five carriers of this noble ideal—the three ‘premier universities’ in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, plus two new universities to be sited in the North and the South respectively. These national universities, he felt, ‘could ensure the continuity and development of all-India cultural life so essential in the context of regionalization’. They would ‘provide the nation with a window to the world, and also a yard-stick by which the work of the regional universities could be evaluated’.

In his contribution to the symposium, the economist B. R. Shenoy focused on the declining quality of university and college teachers. This, he felt, was due to three reasons: abysmally low salaries, which meant that alternative professions were more attractive; the reproduction in the university of bureaucratic red-tapism, which meant that administrators were more important and more powerful than professors; and regionalism, which ‘on the one hand, repels from the academic profession men from outside the region and, on the other, adds to the pressure for migration out of the profession’. Shenoy also called for the creation of national universities which would be ‘wholly autonomous..., free from interference by the government or any political organization’.

This writer is also not the first to sing the praises of university pluralism. In a talk broadcast over the Delhi station of All India Radio on 17th March 1940, Sir Maurice Gwyer outlined what he saw as the future of the University he was then heading. He called, first of all, for ‘the transference of all the constituent colleges of the [Delhi] University to a common site where

they may stand together as a solid token of that sense of unity and purpose which is perhaps the most vital element in University life; secondly, the extension of the science laboratories and an increase in our present facilities for the teaching of science; and thirdly, the improvement and development of the University Library'. Gwyer went on to say that while the other and older Universities of India were strongly rooted in their respective towns and provinces, 'Delhi University should not be afraid to draw its strength from a whole sub-continent. It should be a symbol of what India herself, above and beyond all her creeds or castes, can offer to the world'.

Gwyer also spoke of the importance of the University reducing its reliance on the public exchequer. He hoped that 'the time will come when to endow a chair of learning at Delhi University will seem to rich men a way, not less noble than others, of perpetuating their memory'. He ended his talk in words that rang true then, and ring truer today:

I am speaking tonight more especially to the citizens of Delhi. Delhi University will always, I hope, be their University as well as a University for all India; and I look forward to the time when they will feel a great pride in its fortunes and in its work. I hope it will be a civic centre in the truest sense, and that those of its sons who are educated within its walls will learn there how to combine a love of their city with a love of their country, to look beyond the immediate conflicts of community and party to the greater unity which lies behind them, and to remember that of all the civic virtues for which a University should stand, a love of truth, a sense of proportion and a spirit of tolerance are not the least.

## VI

Not very long ago, India had some fairly decent universities, but a very poor record in removing mass illiteracy. In the past two decades this situation has been reversed. There is a new energy abroad in the school sector, this driven in part by the state, in part by voluntary organizations, and most of all by parents. Once, many poor families chose to put their children to work rather than send them to school. Now, they wish to place them in a position from which they can, with luck and enterprise, exchange a life of menial labour for a job in the modern economy. As the educationist Vimala Ramachandran pointed out in 2004, 'the demand side had never looked more promising. The overwhelming evidence emanating from studies done in the last 10 years clearly demonstrates that there is a tremendous demand for education—across the board and among all social groups. Wherever the government has ensured a well-functioning school within reach, enrolment has been high'.

Recent developments in primary education call for a cautious optimism. So, perhaps, do recent developments in the realm of advanced scientific research. The past two decades has seen the creation of several high quality research institutes such as the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad, and the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bangalore. The Ministry of Science and Technology has announced that it shall fund four new institutions on the model of the Indian Institute of Science.

On the other hand, our best universities have steadily deteriorated in quality and capability. True, there remain a few well functioning departments, some very fine scholars, and many devoted teachers. Still, I think it is fair to say that in respect of the five criteria enumerated here, the universities of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras probably functioned better in the 1930s and 40s than they do now. The halcyon period of the University of Delhi ran from the 1950s to the 1970s, that of the Jawaharlal Nehru University from the 1970s to the 1990s.

The deterioration that has set in, in these and other universities, has multiple causes. Among them are the varieties of parochialism and populism enumerated above. These malign forces have been stoked by the political leadership. Ministers of Education in the states work consistently to undermine the autonomy of their universities by interfering in appointments high and low. Ministers of Education at the Centre have promoted personal favourites regardless of ability, and also used universities as tools of partisan politics.

Our universities are in crisis, but few people—and none, apparently, in positions of high authority—seem to be aware of this. But perhaps I should amend that last statement. One person in high authority has in fact spoken on the subject of university education. This is the President of India, A. P. J. Abdul Kalam, who recently asked for the creation of a ‘new Nalanda’. Now this is a charming idea, but also a hopelessly romantic one. Surely India’s needs would be better served by renewing our existing universities, by making them more plural, in all senses of the term.

Crafting an agenda for the renewal of our universities is the subject for another essay, to be written by another (and better qualified) scholar. Here, I might just suggest a few items for inclusion on that agenda. First, I think we need to think more seriously about university size. Our big cities each have far too few universities for their own, and the public, good. The universities of Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Delhi and Bangalore each have several hundred institutions affiliated to it, with a combined student population that runs into three lakhs and more. How can these institutions be effectively run, how can standards be maintained, by a single chain of authority headed by a solitary Vice Chancellor?

Second, within each university, big or small, all constituent units must not be treated alike. In particular, colleges and departments with a tradition of excellence in teaching and research should be accorded institutional autonomy, including the autonomy to raise their own funds. Each university must be encouraged to cultivate their own areas of distinction. Those words, ‘distinction’ and ‘excellence’, need to have their meanings restored. For, as we know only too well, in the realm of the academy parochialism and populism work only to propel a race to the bottom. Why not instead work to ensure that some institutions of quality exist, and that those not yet there are encouraged to emulate them?

Third, to attract better teachers one needs more flexibility in recruitment policies. Now, most universities allow only full-time faculty, whose jobs are secure until superannuation, in exchange

for which they must come to work every day and not take outside employment. However, a university in a city such as Mumbai or Kolkata can and must take advantage of the talent available in the public and corporate sector, in the media, and in voluntary organizations. If a scientist in an industrial lab, an editor in a newspaper, a senior lawyer in the High Court, were all permitted to come one day a week to teach one course a year to young and keen students, there would, I think, be a profusion of volunteers. Likewise, with the increasing drift of the finest Indian scholars abroad, statutes and prejudices must be amended to allow some professors to teach for one term only, while spending the rest of the year where they like. The encouragement of adjunct and part-time faculty would, I think, greatly enrich the intellectual life of the university—and also help towards balancing its budget.

At the same time, with regard to full-time faculty our universities need to more seriously combat the pressures of parochialism. A policy of not appointing one's own graduates, at least at the lower levels, would aid a cross-fertilization of intellectual approaches and perspectives. A policy of setting part a certain percentage of teaching jobs—say 30%—for candidates from other states would make each university less parochial as well as more national.

By making one's teaching staff less parochial one can fashion a student body that is less parochial as well. One function that the best colleges and departments have historically served—and can be made to serve again—was to attract outstanding students from outside the state or region. In their pomp, the Delhi School of Economics, the Department of History at the JNU, the School of Fine Arts at M. S. University in Baroda, and the Department of Philosophy at the University of Puné, all had a catchment area that included all of India.

Which brings me, finally, to the question of funding. As of now, almost all universities in India are funded by the state and controlled by the state. In the long term, we need to have many more private universities, which might challenge the public universities to reform and redeem themselves, in the same manner as, say, Jet Airways has forced sharp and mostly beneficial changes on Indian Airlines. In the shorter term, colleges and universities in the state sector must more actively woo successful alumni and industrial houses for funds. The money, when and if it comes, can be tied to specific programmes and departments, but its ultimate use must be left to the discretion of the institution.

The ideals that I have outlined here are the product of an experience that is individual but I think not unrepresentative. My mind was shaped and quickened by the University of Delhi, which I was lucky to know and experience towards the end of its glorious period. But what I owe my alma mater is merely what other and greater Indians have owed their own universities. The national movement, and the building of a free and democratic India, were both nurtured and sustained by men and women whose minds were formed by the universities of India.

It is commonly argued that the impressive growth rates of recent years will be stalled by poor infrastructure: erratic power supply, potholed highways, inadequate public transport, and the

like. My own view is that India's economic and social development depends as crucially on a renewal of its higher education system. As we enter our seventh decade of freedom, what we make of ourselves will depend, far more than we presently seem to realize, on what we make of our universities.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

News report in *The Telegraph*, 12 January 2007, page 8.

André Béteille, 'Universities at the Crossroads', forthcoming in *Current Science*. Béteille is among the few scholars who have written on the history and social role of the Indian university. The essay cited above contains his latest and perhaps most considered views on the subject, but see also Chapters 6 and 7 of his *Antinomies of Society: Essays on Ideologies and Institutions* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Of the valuable collection of essays edited by Mushirul Hasan—*Knowledge, Power and Politics: Educational Institutions in India* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1998).

See Neil DeVotta, *Blowback: Linguistic Nationalism, Institutional Decay and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp 89-91.

'The Academic Freedom of the Universities' (1909), in Edward Shils, editor and translator, *Max Weber on Universities: The Power of the State and the Dignity of the Academic Calling in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp 21-2. If I may interject a personal note here: I was myself taught sociology by a committed Marxist, Anjan Ghosh, who in this respect was a first-class Weberian. Within the classroom, he suspended his political beliefs while introducing his students to the works of the great classical sociologists—Durkheim, Marx, Simmel and Weber himself—all of whom he treated with equal seriousness and empathy.

Béteille, 'Universities at the Crossroads'.

Béteille, 'Universities at the Crossroads'.

When six new appointments were made to Delhi University's Department of Sociology in 1993, five of those selected had previously been students at the department. The sixth, the present writer, was not really an 'outsider' either, for he had a degree from the sister department of economics. However, in the past few years the department has more consciously chosen to recruit scholars trained elsewhere.

Cf Shiv Visvanathan, *Organizing for Science: The Making of an Industrial Research Laboratory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Very occasionally, the snobbery can run in the other direction, as in St. Stephen's College, Delhi, where the 'science types', derisively so-called, study in a building set in an obscure corner of the campus and are discouraged from taking part in the extra-curricular life of the college.

For valuable suggestions on to how to retain academic standards while at the same time being socially inclusive, see Bêteille, 'Universities at the Crossroads'.

Cf Dharma Kumar and Dilip Mookerjee, editors, *D School: Reflections on the Delhi School of Economics* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Edward Shils, 'Students, Politics, and Universities in India', in Philip G. Altbach, editor, *Turmoil and Transition: Higher Education and Student Politics in India* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), pp 2-3, 9.

A. B. Shah, editor, *A National University* (Bombay: Popular Book Depot, 1964), pp 5, 30-1, 34-41. In the 1970s, the Central Government did establish one national university in the North (the Jawaharlal Nehru University) and another in the South (the University of Hyderabad). These two institutions, along with the far older Delhi University, have (as Shah hoped) helped in keeping some kind of all-India intellectual discourse alive. On the other hand, the three founding universities have become more parochial rather than national in their orientation.

'The Future of Delhi University', in Sir Maurice Gwyer, *Convocation and Other Addresses* (Delhi: Cambridge Printing Works, 1942), pp 183-91.

Ramachandran, 'The Best of Times, the Worst of Times', *Seminar*, April 2004.

There have been no comparable developments in the humanities and the social sciences. Here, existing centres of research have been undermined and even destroyed by the politics of patronage. While scientists are usually allowed to choose heads of science institutes, heads of social science or history centres are more often appointed by political preference.

The general decline of the five universities named in this paragraph has been slightly compensated for, perhaps, by the rise of some fine departments in the humanities in the smaller (and less high profile) universities such as Puné, Punjab, Hyderabad and Jadavpur. One should also note, on the positive or optimistic side, the fact that some of the newer universities, such as Hyderabad and the JNU, have taken heed of the mistakes of the past and worked to create some decent departments of science.

As I write, a debate rages in the pages of India's premier science journal on the subject of improving the quality of scientific research in our universities. (See *Current Science*, editorials in issues dated 10 and 25 December 2006 respectively.) The topic is current, indeed—this morning's newspaper reports a speech made by the Prime Minister affirming the belief that 'our scientific enterprise and research should be rooted in the university system', and urging that 'the centre of gravity of science and research... move back closer to universities' (*The Times of India*, 11 January 2007). These remarks were made in an address to the CSIR's own annual meeting—a significant choice of venue, since they signal, in effect, that the Government has been mistaken these past fifty years in making CSIR the nodal point for scientific research.

Dr M. M. Joshi worked assiduously to make the universities a handmaiden in his Hindutva agenda. His successor, the present incumbent, has used his perch largely to woo backward castes and the minorities back to the Congress. This strategy reached its nadir when a delegation led by the Minister went to Saudi Arabia to ask its reactionary rulers to fund centres that would then be named after them.

The Times of India of 10 January 2007 (Bangalore edition) reports that the administration of Bangalore University wants to downsize—as well they might. But their solution to the problem of unmanageable numbers is less easy to endorse. For, they wish to trifurcate the university into three distinct and separate units—the first to oversee the undergraduate colleges, the second to manage the postgraduate departments, the third to conduct examinations and handle affiliations.

A model here is the Social Communication and Media Department of Sophia College, Mumbai, which has made superb use of the multifarious talents of the working journalists of the city.

Sustaining this policy might require another quota—in university housing, where out-of-state faculty would need to get preferential allotment. But there is a useful precedent—in our High Courts, where the Chief Justice has to be from outside the state.

Although we have many privately funded colleges, these tend to focus on professional courses such as management, engineering, medicine and the law. There is, as yet, no private university, in the sense used here.

This essay is based on the inaugural address to the symposium on ‘The Quest for Excellence: Great Universities and their Cities, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai’, Department of History, Mumbai University, January 2007. I am grateful to Mariam Dossal for inviting me to speak to the symposium, and to André Beteille, Aditya Bhattacharjea, Niraja Gopal Jayal, and Sunil Khilnani for helpful comments on an earlier draft. I remain solely responsible for the views (and prejudices) expressed here.

**(Economic and Political Weekly, 17th February 2007)**

## HOW MUCH SHOULD A PERSON CONSUME?

### University Of California Press, Chapter IX

“The United States is presiding at a general reorganization of the ways of living throughout the world.”

André Siegfried, speaking in 1932

This chapter takes as its point of departure an old essay by John Kenneth Galbraith—an essay so ancient and obscure that it might very well have been forgotten even by its prolific author. The essay was written in 1958, the same year that Galbraith published *The Affluent Society*, a book that wryly anatomized the social consequences of the mass consumption age. In his book, Galbraith had highlighted the ‘preoccupation with productivity and production’ in postwar America and Western Europe. The population in these societies had for the most part been adequately housed, clothed, and fed; now they expressed a desire for ‘more elegant cars, more exotic food, more erotic clothing, more elaborate entertainment’.

When Galbraith termed 1950s America the ‘Affluent Society’ he meant not only that this was a society most of whose members were hugely prosperous when reckoned against other societies and other times, but also that this was a society so dedicated to affluence that the possession and consumption of material goods became the exclusive standard of individual and collective achievement. He quoted the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer, who remarked that in modern America, ‘any device or regulation which interfered, or can be conceived as interfering, with [the] supply of more and better things is resisted with unreasoning horror, as the religious resist blasphemy, or the warlike pacifism’.

The essay I speak of was written months after the book which made Galbraith’s name and reputation. ‘How Much Should a Country Consume?’ is its provocative title, and it can be read as a reflective footnote to *The Affluent Society*. In the book itself, Galbraith had noted the disjunction between ‘private affluence and public squalor’, of how the single-minded pursuit of wealth had diverted attention and resources from the nurturing of true democracy, which he defined as the provision of public infrastructure, the creation of decent schools, parks, and hospitals. Now the economist turned his attention, all too fleetingly, to the long-term consequences of this collective promotion of consumption, of the ‘gargantuan and growing appetite’ for resources in contemporary America. The American conservation movement, he remarked, had certainly noted the massive exploitation of resources and materials in the postwar period. However, its response was to look for more efficient methods of extraction, or the substitution of one material for another through technological innovation. There was, wrote



Galbraith, a noticeable 'selectivity in the conservationist's approach to materials consumption.' For

if we are concerned about our great appetite for materials, it is plausible to seek to increase the supply, or decrease waste, to make better use of the stocks that are available, and to develop substitutes. But what of the appetite itself? Surely this is the ultimate source of the problem. If it continues its geometric course, will it not one day have to be restrained? Yet in the literature of the resource problem this is the forbidden question. Over it hangs a nearly total silence. It is as though, in the discussion of the chance for avoiding automobile accidents, we agree not to make any mention of speed!

A cultural explanation for this silence had been previously provided by the great Berkeley geographer Carl Sauer. Writing in 1938, Sauer remarked that 'the doctrine of a passing frontier of nature replaced by a permanent and sufficiently expanding frontier of technology is a contemporary and characteristic expression of occidental culture, itself a historical-geographical product.' This frontier attitude, he went on, 'has the recklessness of an optimism that has become habitual, but which is residual from the brave days when north-European freebooters overran the world and put it under tribute.' Warning that the surge of growth at the expense of nature would not last indefinitely, Sauer—speaking for his fellow Americans—noted wistfully that 'we have not yet learned the difference between yield and loot. We do not like to be economic realists'.

John Kenneth Galbraith had identified two major reasons for the silence with regard to consumption. One was ideological, the worship of the Great God Growth. The principle of Growth (always with that capital G) was a cardinal belief of the American people; this necessarily implied a continuous increase in the production of consumer goods. The second reason was political, the widespread scepticism of the state. For the America of the 1950s had witnessed the 'resurgence of a notably over-simplified view of economic life which [ascribed] a magical automatism to the price system...'. Now Galbraith was himself an unreconstructed New Dealer, who would tackle the problem of over-consumption as he would tackle the problem of under-employment, that is, through purposive state intervention. At the time he wrote, however, free-market economics ruled, and 'since consumption could not be discussed without raising the question of an increased role for the state, it was not discussed'.

Four years later, Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring*, and the modern American environmental movement gathered pace. Would not one have expected this new voice of civil society to undertake what the market could not? As it happened, consumption continued to be the great unasked question of the conservation movement. The movement principally focused on two things: the threats to human health posed by pollution, and the threats to wild species and wild habitats posed by economic expansion. The latter concern became, in fact, the defining motif of the movement. The dominance of wilderness protection in American environmentalism has promoted an essentially negativist agenda, the protection of the parks and their animals by freeing them of human habitation and productive activities. As the historian Samuel Hays points

out, 'natural environments which formerly had been looked upon as "useless" waiting only to be developed, now came to be thought of as "useful" for filling human wants and needs. They played no less a significant role in the advanced consumer society than did such material goods as hi fi sets or indoor gardens'. While saving these islands of biodiversity, environmentalists paid scant attention to what was happening outside them. In the American economy as a whole, the consumption of energy and materials continued to rise.

A perceptive, and home-grown, critic of this selective environmentalism was the poet Wendell Berry. In an essay published in 1987, Berry rejected 'an assumed division or divisibility between nature and humanity, or wildness and domesticity'. In his view, 'conservation is going to prove increasingly futile and increasingly meaningless if its proscriptions and forbiddings are not positively answered by an economy that rewards and enforces good use'. He was himself of the conviction that 'the wildernesses cannot survive if our economy does not change'.

In the American context, Wendell Berry was—the metaphor is inescapable—a voice in the wild. For the growing popular interest in the wild and the beautiful not merely accepted the parameters of the affluent society, but was wont to see nature itself as merely one more good to be consumed. The uncertain commitment of most nature lovers to a more comprehensive environmental ideology is illustrated by the paradox that they were willing to drive thousands of miles, using up scarce oil and polluting the atmosphere, to visit national parks and sanctuaries; thus using anti-ecological means to marvel in the beauty of forests, swamps or mountains protected as specimens of a 'pristine' and 'untouched' nature.

The selectivity of the conservationist approach to consumption was underlined in the works of biologists obsessed with the 'population problem'. Influential American scientists such as Paul Ehrlich and Garret Hardin identified human population growth as the single most important reason for environmental degradation. This is how Ehrlich began the first chapter of his best-selling book, *The Population Bomb*:

I have understood the population explosion intellectually for a long time. I came to understand it emotionally one stinking hot night in Delhi a couple of years ago. My wife and daughter and I were returning to our hotel in an ancient taxi. The seats were hopping with fleas. The only functional gear was third. As we crawled through the city, we entered a crowded slum area. The temperature was well over 100, and the air was a haze of dust and smoke. The streets seemed alive with people. People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, people arguing and screaming. People thrusting their hands through the taxi window, begging. People defecating and urinating. People clinging to buses. People herding animals. People, people, people, people.

Here exploding numbers are blamed for increasing pollution, stinking hot air, and even technological obsolescence (that ancient taxi!). Through the 1970s and 80s, Neo-Malthusian interpretations gained wide currency. Countries such as India, and, especially, Bangladesh, were

commonly blamed for causing an environmental crisis. Not surprisingly, activists in these countries were quick to take offence, pointing out that the United States of America consumes, per capita as well as in the aggregate, a far greater proportion of the world's resources. Table One gives some partial evidence of this. For apart from its over-use of nature's stock (which the table documents), American society has also placed an unbearable burden on nature's sink (which the table ignores). Thus the atmosphere and the oceans can absorb about 13 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. This absorptive capacity, if distributed fairly amongst all the people of the world, would allow each human being to have the right to emit about 2.3 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year. At present an American discharges in excess of 20 tonnes annually, a German 12 tonnes, a Japanese 9 tonnes, an Indian a little over one tonne. If we look at the process historically the charges mount, for it is the industrialized countries, led by the United States, who have been principally responsible for the build-up of greenhouse gases over the past hundred and fifty years.

Table I

U. S. Share of World Consumption of Key Materials, 1995 (figures in million tonnes)

(1) (2) (3) (4)\*

Material World Production U. S. Consumption 3 as % of 2

Minerals 7,641 2,410 31.54

Wood 724 170 23.48

Products

Metals 1,196 132 11.03

Synthetics 252 131 51.98

All Materials 9,813 2,843 28.97

\* U. S. population is approximately 4.42 % of total world population

Source: Computed from State of the World 1999 (New York: Worldwatch Institute and W. W. Norton, 1999)

These figures explain why Southern scholars and activists like to argue that the real 'population problem' is in America, since the birth of a single child there would have the same impact on the global environment as the birth of (say) seventy Indonesian children. There was a Bangladeshi diplomat who made this case whenever he could, in the United Nations and elsewhere. But after a visit to an American supermarket he was obliged to modify his argument, to claim instead that

the birth of an American dog (or cat) was the equivalent, ecologically speaking, of the birth of a dozen Bangladeshi children.

Arguments like this, when presented or published in the United States, tend to lay one open to the charge of 'anti-Americanism'. So let me make it clear at once that I consider America to be, in many respects, a model for the world. Within its borders, it is far and away the most democratic of all the countries that claim membership of the United Nations. Over the years, I have often been

struck by the dignity of labour in America, by the ease with which high-ranking Americans carry their own loads, fix their own fences, and mow their own lawns. This, it seems to me, is part of a wider absence of caste or class distinctions that would be simply unthinkable in Europe or, indeed, India. Unlike those other places, here one can actually travel from the log-cabin to the White House, as witness the careers of Honest Abe in the 19th century and Dishonest Bill in the twentieth.

Left-wing intellectuals have tended to downplay these American achievements: the respect for the individual, the remarkable social mobility, the searching scrutiny to which public officials and state agencies are subjected. They see only the imperial power, the exploiter, and the bully, the invader of faraway lands and the manipulator of international organizations to serve the interests of the American economy.

Admittedly, on the world stage America is not a pretty sight. Even between its various wars of adventure, its arrogance is on continuous display. The United States has disregarded strictures passed on it by the International Court of Justice, and defaulted on its obligations to the United Nations. It has violated the global climate change treaty, and the global biodiversity treaty. It has not signed the agreement to abolish the production of land mines. The only international treaties it signs and honours are those it can both draft and impose on other countries, such as the agreement on Intellectual Property Rights.

Liberals and libertarians, whether American or not, salute the robustly democratic traditions of the United States. Socialists and anti-imperialists, whether American or not, castigate the bullying and overbearing instincts of the United States. Neither side is willing to see the other side of the picture. For the truth about America is that it is at once deeply democratic and instinctively imperialist. This curious co-existence of contrary values is certainly exceptional in the history of the world. Other democratic countries, such as Sweden or Norway at the present time, are not imperialist. Scandinavian countries honour their international obligations, and (unlike the Americans) generously support social welfare programmes in the poorer parts of the world. Other imperialist countries, such as France and Great Britain in the past, were not properly democratic. In the heyday of European expansion, men without property and all women did not have the vote. Even after suffrage was extended, British governments were run by an

oligarchy. The imagination boggles at the thought of a Ken Starr examining the sexual and other peccadilloes of a Benjamin Disraeli.

My own view is that the link between democracy at home and imperialism abroad is provided by the American consumer economy, its apparently insatiable greed for the resources of other lands. Contrary to what Wendell Berry had thought, the wildernesses at home continued to be protected, but only because the ecological footprint of the American consumer grew, and grew. The free-booting instincts of the pioneer, once set loose on the lands to the West which were formally part of the nation, now found play in lands and waters east, south and north—whether these belonged to America or not. To cite only the most obvious example, the United States imports well over 50% of the oil it consumes.

This link seems to have escaped American environmentalism and, more surprisingly and regrettably, American scholarship as well. Consider the rich and growing academic field of environmental history. As I suggested in Chapter I, scholars in other parts of the world have taken much inspiration from the works of American exemplars, from their methodological subtlety and fruitful criss-crossing of disciplinary boundaries. For all this, there is a studied insularity among the historians of North America. There were, at last count, more than three hundred professional environmental historians in the U. S., and yet few have seriously studied the global consequences of the consumer society, the impact on land, soil, forests, climate, etc. of the American Way of Life.

One example of this territorial blindness is the Gulf Wars. In that prescient essay of 1958, John Kenneth Galbraith remarked that ‘it remains a canon of modern diplomacy that any preoccupation with oil should be concealed by calling on our still ample reserves of sanctimony’. To be sure, there were Americans who tore apart the veil of this sanctimonious hypocrisy, who pointed out that it was the United States government that had backed and armed Saddam Hussain, the dictator it now wished to overthrow. Yet the essentially material imperatives of the adventures in the Middle East remained unexamined. It was the leftwing British newspaper, *The Guardian*, which claimed that the first Gulf War was carried out to safeguard *The American Way of Driving*. No American historian, however, has taken to heart the wisdom in that throwaway remark, to reveal in all its starkness the ecological imperialism of the sole superpower in the world.

### III

I would now like to contrast the American case with the German one. Environmentalists in Germany have been more forthright in their criticisms of the consumer society. ‘The key to a sustainable development model worldwide’, writes Helmut Lippelt, ‘is the question of whether West European societies really are able to reconstruct their industrial systems in order to permit an ecologically and socially viable way of production and consumption’. That Lippelt does not include the U. S. or Japan is noteworthy, an expression of his (and his movement’s) willingness

to take the burden upon themselves. West Europeans should reform themselves, rather than transfer their existing 'patterns of high production and high consumption to eastern Europe and the "Third World" [and thus] destroy the earth'.

For the German Greens, economic growth in Europe and North America has been made possible only through the economic and ecological exploitation of the Third World. The philosopher Rudolf Bahro was characteristically blunt; 'the present way of life of the most industrially advanced nations', he remarked in 1984, 'stands in a global and antagonistic contradiction to the natural conditions of human existence. We are eating up what other nations and future generations need to live on'. From this perspective,

The working class here [in the North] is the richest lower class in the world. And if I look at the problem from the point of view of the whole of humanity, not just from that of Europe, then I must say that the metropolitan working class is the worst exploiting class in history... What made poverty bearable in eighteenth or nineteenth-century Europe was the prospect of escaping it through exploitation of the periphery. But this is no longer a possibility, and continued industrialism in the Third World will mean poverty for whole generations and hunger for millions.

Bahro was a famous 'Fundl', a leader of that section of the German Greens which stood in the most uncompromising antagonism to modern society. But even the most hardheaded members of the other, or 'Realo', faction, acknowledged the unsustainability, on the global plane, of industrial society. The parliamentarian (and future Foreign Minister) Joschka Fischer, asked by a reporter where he planned to spend his old age, replied: 'In the Frankfurt cemetery, although by that time we may pose an environmental hazard with all the poisons, heavy metals and dioxin that we carry around in our bodies'. Or as a party document more matter-of-factly put it: 'The global spread of industrial economic policies and lifestyles is exhausting the basic ecological health of our planet faster than it can be replenished'. This global view, coupled with the stress on accountability, called for 'far-reaching voluntary commitments to restraint by wealthy nations'. The industrialized countries, who consume three-fourths of the world's energy and resources, and who contribute the lion's share of 'climate-threatening gaseous emissions', must curb their voracious appetite while allowing Southern nations to grow out of poverty. Green theorists ask for the cancellation of international debt, the banning of trade in products that destroy vulnerable ecosystems, and most radical of all, for the freer migration of peoples from poor countries to rich ones.

These elements in the Green program were, of course, forged as an alternative to the policies promoted by the two dominant political parties in Germany, themselves committed to the Great God Growth. Between 1998 and 2005, the Greens found themselves sharing power at the Federal level, junior partners, but partners nevertheless, in a coalition dominated by the Social Democrat. Being in power certainly tamed them. They now worked only for incremental change, instead of

the wholesale restructuring of the consumption and production system some of them had previously advocated.

The critique of over-consumption made manifest by the German Greens is not absent in other European environmental traditions. A few months prior to the Earth Summit of 1992, the Dutch Alliance of Sustainable Development invited four Southern scholars to write a report on the Dutch economy and environment. A Brazilian anthropologist, an Indian sociologist, a Tanzanian agronomist and an Indonesian activist, two men and two women, spent six weeks in Holland, talking to a wide cross-section of citizens and public officials. Their report focused on the Dutch 'addiction to affluence', as revealed in an over-reliance on the motor-car, a dependence on the lands and resources of other countries, and high levels of pollution. The foreign critics posed the sharp question, 'Can Dutch society put limits to itself?' They thought, optimistically, that the developed democratic culture of the Netherlands did offer possibilities of self-correction, but for that to work, political action had to be accompanied by technical change, by the exercise of individual restraint, and by a wider social resolve to share their wealth with the less-advantaged societies of the South.

It says something about Dutch environmentalists that they extended this invitation in the first place. At the risk (once more) of being called anti-American, it must be said that one cannot easily imagine the Sierra Club initiating such an examination.

#### IV

Fifty years before the founding of the German Green party, and thirty years before the article by Galbraith with which this chapter began, an Indian politician had pointed to the unsustainability, at the global level, of the Western model of economic development. 'God forbid, he wrote, 'that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom (England) is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts'.

The man was Mahatma Gandhi, writing in his journal *Young India* in December 1928. Two years earlier, Gandhi had claimed that to 'make India like England and America is to find some other races and places of the earth for exploitation'. As it appeared that the Western nations had already 'divided all the known races outside Europe for exploitation and there are no new worlds to discover', he pointedly asked: 'What can be the fate of India trying to ape the West?' .

Gandhi's critique of Western industrialization has, of course, profound implications for the way we live and relate to the environment today. For him, 'the distinguishing characteristic of modern civilization is an indefinite multiplicity of wants'; whereas ancient civilizations were marked by an 'imperative restriction upon, and a strict regulating of, these wants' . In uncharacteristically intemperate tones, he spoke of his 'wholeheartedly detest[ing] this mad desire to destroy distance and time, to increase animal appetites, and go to the ends of the earth in search of their

satisfaction. If modern civilization stands for all this, and I have understood it to do so, I call it satanic’.

At the level of the individual, Gandhi’s code of voluntary simplicity also offered a sustainable alternative to modern lifestyles. One of his best known aphorisms, that the ‘world has enough for everybody’s need, but not enough for everybody’s greed’, is, in effect, an exquisitely phrased one-line environmental ethic. This was an ethic he himself practiced; for resource recycling, and the minimization of wants, were integral to his life.

Gandhi’s arguments have been revived and elaborated by the present generation of Indian environmentalists. As explained in Chapter II, their land is veritably an ecological disaster zone, marked by high rates of deforestation, species loss, land degradation, and air and water pollution. The consequences of this abuse of nature have been chiefly borne by the poor in the countryside—the peasants, tribals, fisherfolk and pastoralists who have seen their resources snatched away or depleted by more powerful economic interests. For in the last few decades, the men who rule India have attempted precisely to ‘make India like England and America’. Without the access to resources and markets enjoyed by those two nations when they began to industrialize, India has had perforce to rely on the exploitation of its own people and environment. The natural resources of the countryside have been increasingly channelized to meet the needs of the urban-industrial sector; the diversion of forests, water, minerals, etc. to the elite having accelerated processes of environmental degradation even as it has deprived rural and tribal communities of their traditional rights of access and use. Meanwhile, the modern sector has moved aggressively into the remaining resource frontiers of India, the North-East and the Andaman and Nicobar islands. This bias towards urban-industrial development has resulted only in a one-sided exploitation of the hinterland, thus proving Gandhi’s contention that ‘the blood of the villages is the cement with which the edifice of the cities is built’.

The preceding paragraph brutally summarizes arguments and evidence provided in a whole array of Indian environmentalist tracts. Simplifying still further, one might say that the key contribution of the Indian environmental movement has been to point to inequalities of consumption within a society (or nation). In this respect they have complemented the work of their German counterparts, who have most effectively highlighted the inequalities of consumption between societies and nations.

The criticisms of these environmentalists are strongly flavoured by morality, by the sheer injustice of one group or country consuming more than its fair share of the earth’s resources, by the political imperative of restoring some semblance of equality in global and national consumption. I now present an analytical framework that might more dispassionately explain these asymmetries in patterns of consumption. Derived in the first instance from the Indian experience, this model rests on a fundamental opposition between two groups, termed omnivores and ecosystem people respectively. The two groups are distinguished above all by the size of their ‘resource catchment’. Thus omnivores, who include industrialists, rich farmers, state



officials, and the growing middle class based in the cities (estimated at in excess of 100 million), have the capability to draw upon the natural resources of the whole of India to maintain their lifestyles. Ecosystem people, on the other hand—who would include roughly two-thirds of the rural population, say about 400 million people—rely for the most part on the resources of their own vicinity, from a catchment of a few dozen square miles at best. Such are the small and marginal farmers in rain-fed tracts, the landless labourers, and also the heavily resource-dependent communities of hunter-gatherers, swidden agriculturists, animal herders and wood-working artisans, all stubborn ‘pre-modern’ survivals in an increasingly ‘post-modern’ landscape.

The process of development in independent India has been characterised by a basic asymmetry between the omnivores and the ecosystem people. A one-sentence definition of economic development, as it has unfolded over the last sixty years, would be: ‘Development is the channelizing of an ever increasing volume of natural resources, through the intervention of the state apparatus and at the cost of the state exchequer, to subserve the interests of the rural and urban omnivores’. Some central features of this process have been:

1. The concentration of political power/decision making in hands of omnivores.
2. Hence the use of the state machinery to divert natural resources to islands of omnivore prosperity, especially through the use of subsidies. Wood for paper mills, fertilizers for rich farmers, water and power for urban dwellers, have all been supplied by the state to omnivores at well below market prices.
3. The culture of subsidies has fostered an indifference of omnivores to environmental degradation caused by them, this compounded by their ability to pass on its costs to ecosystem people or to society at large.
4. Projects based on the capture of wood, water or minerals—such as eucalyptus plantations, large dams or open-cast mining—have tended to dispossess the ecosystem people who previously enjoyed ready access to those resources. This has led to a rising tide of protests by the victims of development; Chipko, Narmada and dozens of other protests that we know collectively as the ‘Indian environmental movement’.
5. But development has also permanently displaced large numbers of ecosystem people from their homes. Some twenty million Indians have been uprooted by steel mills, dams, and the like; countless others have been forced to move to the cities in search of a legitimate livelihood denied to them in the countryside (sometimes as a direct consequence of environmental degradation). Thus has been created a third class, of ecological refugees, living in slums and temporary shelters in the towns and cities of India.

This framework, which divides the Indian population into the three socio-ecological classes of omnivores, ecosystem people, and ecological refugees, can help us understand why economic development has destroyed nature but also failed to remove poverty. The framework synthesizes the insights of ecology with sociology, in that it distinguishes social classes by their respective resource catchments, by their cultures and styles of consumption, and also by their widely varying powers to influence state policy.

The framework is analytical as well as value-laden, descriptive and prescriptive. It helps us understand and interpret nature-based conflicts at various spatial scales: from the village community upwards through the district and region on to the nation. Stemming from the study of the history of modern India, it might also throw light on the dynamics of socio-ecological change in other large, rapidly industrializing countries such as Brazil and Malaysia, where too have erupted conflicts between ‘omnivores’ and ‘ecosystem people’, and whose cities are likewise marked by a growing population of ‘ecological refugees’. At a pinch, it might explain asymmetries and inequalities at the global level too. It was in the middle of the 19th century that a German radical proclaimed, ‘Workers of the World, Unite!’. But as another German radical recently reminded this writer, the reality of our times is very nearly the reverse—the process of globalization whose motto might very well be ‘Omnivores of the World, Unite!’

## V

What then is the prospect for the future? There are, at present, two alternative answers to this question. One answer guides the work of the institutions that constitute the so-called ‘Washington Consensus’. It also informs the economic policies of most national governments. The other answer animates the activism of the environmental and anti-globalization movements.

The first alternative I call The Fallacy of the Romantic Economist. This states that everyone can become an omnivore, if only we allow the market full play. When, back in 1972, resource scientists had raised the question of ‘Limits to Growth’, the economist Wilfrid Beckerman claimed that there was ‘no reason to suppose that economic growth cannot continue for another 2, 500 years’. The optimism was wholly characteristic of a profession mistakenly dubbed the ‘dismal science’. And with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the optimism has been reinforced and renewed. Economists everywhere are the cheerleaders for the processes of globalization now unfolding, processes which, in their view, promises a universalization of American styles of consumption.

My own opinion is that aspects of economic globalization are indeed welcome. These include the free flow of information, the inducements to innovation, and the encouragement to entrepreneurship. In countries like China and India, the retreat of the State from the economy has led to much quicker rates of economic growth. All this has greatly augmented human welfare, in the short-term. The long-term prospects are more worrying. One problem, foregrounded by left-

wing critics, is that the fruits of economic growth have been very unevenly distributed. Although, in both India and China, aggregate poverty has substantially reduced, there remains large pockets of deprivation.

The problem of equity can perhaps be mitigated by purposive social policies, by spreading education and health across the board, and by nurturing opportunities for growth among communities and regions who appear to be 'falling behind'. Less tractable is the problem of ecology.

Consider thus the spread of personalized transport in China, where, as it was once in America, the possession of a car is the one true sign that a human being has become properly modern. As The Economist magazine approvingly reports, the car is seen by the middle-class Chinese as the 'symbol of freedom and status'. In 2002, the demand for cars in China increased by 56%, in 2003 by 75%. In 2004, the State news agency, Xinhua, proclaimed that 'China has begun to enter the age of mass car consumption. This is a great and historic advance'. Shanghai has a Formula One race-track now, costing \$ 320 million. The city will soon have a \$ 50 m car museum.

There has been, as our precocious chapter epigraph suggests, a general reorganization of ways of life in the past century, which the Americans have led, with the rest of the world panting behind them. The Chinese, relative latecomers to this race, are striving hard to catch up with the leaders. In the capital city, Beijing, one in six residents now have cars. But for the country as a whole the proportion is one in 125, way below the U. S. average, which is 6 in 10. But, as the quote from Xinhua indicates, the public and popular desire is for China to become, in these respects, exactly like America. And in the cities of modern India the feelings are the same. Here too there has been a rapid spread of the motor-car, here too the sentiment among the young professional that not to possess one is to be left out in the cold.

Consider the impact on the environment of the spectacular recent growth in the economy of my own home town, Bangalore. Within a generation, a once sleepy cantonment has been transformed into a city of eight million, and a industrial and commercial hub. Although the growth has been led by a relatively 'dematerialized' industry, namely informational technology, the income generated and the desires spawned have had strikingly material effects. Bangalore now has an estimated 2 million motor vehicles. A little over half of these run on two wheels: scooters and motor-cycles. About a quarter are cars; the rest, buses, trucks, and utility vehicles. These take metals to build and oil to run and roads to drive on, and, lest we forget, emit by no means harmless chemicals into the air. The massive influx of population has also caused a building boom—with large offices made of cement and glass, and larger apartment buildings, likewise consuming vast amounts of energy and materials.

A question never asked by economists (or by The Economist) is this—can the world, as a whole, achieve American levels of car ownership? Can there be a world with four billion cars, an China with 700 million cars and an India with 600 million cars? Where will the oil and gas to run them

come from? The metals to build them with? The tar for the roads to drive them on? And I take the car here as merely being indexical of a certain style of consumption. For with its use also come demands for other resources, other goods. In China and India now, as in the America of the 1950s, with the wish to possess more elegant cars has come also the desire for more exotic food, more erotic clothing, more elaborate entertainment.

In a recent series of articles, the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has written with alarm about the threats to the global environment posed by Chinese economic development. The billion-strong population of China, he says, use 45 billion pairs of chopsticks every year, these accounting for 25 million full-grown trees. Should they not move to eating with their fingers or with steel utensils instead? Speaking of the increasing energy consumption in China, he notes that a single shop in the city of Shenzhen sold one thousand air-conditioners in a single hot weekend. 'There is a limit to how long you can do that', Friedman warns.

'What we don't want', writes the New York Times columnist, 'is for China to protect its own environment and then strip everyone else's in the developing world by importing their forests and minerals'. 'China's appetite for imported wood', he points out, 'had led to the stripping of forests in Russia, Africa, Burma and Brazil. China has just outsourced its environmental degradation'. This, says Friedman, 'is why the most important strategy the U. S. and China need to pursue, in concert, is one that brings business, government, and NGOs together to produce a more sustainable form of development—so China can create a model for itself and others on how to do more things with less stuff and fewer emissions'.

Friedman might have added that China has only been doing for the past decade what his own country has done for the past century: that is, protect its woods and forests while devastating the environments of other countries. Even now, it might help if the original sinner promotes a more sustainable form of development within its own borders. It still does more things with much more stuff and massive emissions, facts which make its preaching to other countries so much harder to swallow. That said, the industrialization of India and China does pose special problems, these caused by the weight of sheer numbers. As Gandhi understood as early as 1928, if the most populous nations sought to emulate the ecologically wasteful ways of the most powerful, they put in peril the very conditions of human survival on this earth. So, by the time the Indians and the Chinese reach American levels of consumption, will they have stripped the world bare like locusts?

When I once posed this question in a seminar at the University of California at Berkeley, a biology professor answered that the solution lay in developments in modern genetics. It would soon be possible, he said, to engineer adult human beings who were two feet tall and weighed, on the average, a mere twenty kilograms, but who had the brains and techniques to yet outwit and dominate the rest of creation. This new race of Super(Small)Men would drive smaller cars on narrower roads to tiny offices from still more tiny homes. In other words, they could live more-or-less like the average American today, while consuming a fraction of the resources he did.

That prospect is, for the moment and perhaps for a long while yet, in the realm of fantasy. In the world we know and live in, what we see is India and China simply trying to become like England and America and thus, as Gandhi predicted, trying to 'find some other races and places of the earth for exploitation'. The Chinese interest in the Sudan or the Indian interest in Central Asia exactly parallels America's interest in the Middle East. We can see the leaders of these 'emerging' economies emulate the leaders of the already emerged, travelling to obscure parts of the world, sniffing around for oil. Both countries are also, like America, expanding their military, and both are, like America again, refusing to endorse international agreements that would bind them to the more responsible use of natural resources.

Forget the rest of the world, then. All Chinese or all Indians cannot become omnivores, either. The attempt to chase this fallacy will lead only to bitter social conflict and serious environmental degradation.

## VI

The alternative to the fallacy of the romantic economist is what I call the Fallacy of the Romantic Environmentalist. This holds that ecosystem people want to remain ecosystem people. The fallacy comes in two versions; the agrarian, and the primitivist or deep ecological. Let us take them in turn.

In 1937, soon after he had moved to a village in central India to devote himself to rural reconstruction, Gandhi defined his ideal village as follows:

It will have cottages with sufficient light and ventilation, built of a material obtainable within a radius of five miles of it. The cottages will have courtyards enabling householders to plant vegetables for domestic use and to house their cattle. The village lanes and streets will be free of all avoidable dust. It will have wells according to its needs and accessible to all. It will have houses of worship for all, also a common meeting place, a village common for grazing its cattle, a co-operative dairy, primary and secondary schools in which [vocational] education will be the central fact, and it will have Panchayats for settling disputes. It will produce its own grains, vegetables and fruit, and its own Khadi. This is roughly my idea of a model village...

In many respects this is an appealing ideal: stressing local self-reliance, a clean and hygienic environment, the collective management and use of those gifts of nature so necessary for rural life, water and pasture. The problem is that Gandhi himself wanted it generalized. That is, in the India of his conception there would 700, 000 such villages run on ecological and moral lines. As for cities and factories, it was not clear what would happen to those that already existed; certainly new ones were not to be encouraged. A certain status was also implied; India was, and would always remain, a land of villages and villagers.

The anti-urban orientation of Gandhi was shared by his followers, such as J. C. Kumarappa, and it has been emphatically affirmed by his modern-day admirers. Contemporary Gandhian environmentalists, such as Medha Patkar and Sunderlal Bahuguna, see cities as corrupting and factories as polluting, this again in both senses, moral as well as ecological. The opportunities the one offer and the commodities the other produces are regarded as ephemeral to the good life. Certainly, their own work has been on protecting themselves and their constituency from these inducements. The peasant must remain a peasant; indeed, they would say, he wants to remain a peasant.

The 'ecosystem person' of the deep ecological vision is more likely to be a hunter-gatherer than a subsistence farmer. Still, like the agrarian, the committed deep ecologist is resolutely opposed to the artefacts of modernity; whether technological, social, or aesthetic. Some elements of their preferred Utopia have been described in Chapter III; to which let me now add a contemporary effort to create such a Utopia in practice. This is the handiwork of a man named Douglas Tompkins, an American billionaire who had a mid-life conversion experience and became a deep ecologist. Selling his clothing business for \$ 150 million, he bought a thousand square miles of Chilean forest and resolved to save it for posterity; save not just the forests, but also the people who dwelled in it. He had a home built for himself, by local workmen using local methods, and employed local folk musicians playing timeless, or at least unchangeable, tunes. There was no electricity allowed in the campus; and no cars, although an exception was made for the helicopter which brought the owner in and sometimes took him out. Otherwise, Tompkins kept out 'the global economy which was a threat to their traditional culture'. As a visiting journalist wrote, Tompkins did not merely seek to save the land and forests, he planned 'to freeze the people in place'.

Strikingly, the environmental activists' rejection of modernity is being reproduced in and by influential sections of the academic world. Anthropologists in particular are almost falling over themselves in writing epitaphs to development, in works that seemingly dismiss the very prospects of directed social change in the world outside Europe and America. It is implied that development is a nasty imposition on the innocent peasant and tribal, who, left to himself, would not willingly partake of Enlightenment rationality, modern technology, or modern consumer goods. This literature has become so abundant and so influential that it has even been anthologized, in a volume called (what else!) *The Post Development Reader*.

The editor of this volume is a retired Iranian diplomat now living in the South of France. The authors of those other demolitions of the development project are, without exception, tenured professors at well-established Western universities. I rather suspect that the objects of their sympathy would cheerfully exchange their own social position with that of their chroniclers. For if it is impossible to create a world peopled entirely by omnivores, it is equally a fallacy that ecosystem people want to remain as they are, that they do not want to enhance their own resource consumption. I think the tenured critics of 'development' and 'modernity' need to be reminded of these words of the late Raymond Williams, here speaking of his boyhood in Wales:

At home we were glad of the Industrial Revolution, and of its consequent social and political changes. True, we lived in a very beautiful farming valley, and the valleys beyond the limestone we could all see were ugly. But there was one gift that was overriding, one gift which at any price we would take, the gift of power that is everything to men who have worked with their hands. It was slow in coming to us, in all its effects, but steam power, the petrol engine, electricity, these and their host of products in commodities and services, we took as quickly as we could get them, and were glad. I have seen all these things being used, and I have seen the things they replaced. I will not listen with any patience to any acid listing of them—you know the sneer you can get into plumbing, baby Austins, aspirin, contraceptives, canned food. But I say to these Pharisees: dirty water, headaches, broken women, hunger and monotony of diet. The working people, in town and country alike, will not listen (and I support them) to any account of our society which supposes that these things are not progress: not just mechanical, external progress either, but a real service of life.

This point can be made as effectively by way of anecdote. Some years ago, a group of Indian scholars and activists gathered in the southern town of Manipal for a national meeting to commemorate Mahatma Gandhi's one-hundred-and twenty-fifth birth anniversary. They spoke against a backdrop of a lifesize portrait of Gandhi, clad in the loincloth he wore for the last thirty years of his life. Speaker after speaker invoked the mode of dress as symbolizing the message of the Mahatma. Why did we all not follow his example and give up everything, to thus mingle more definitively with the masses?

Then, on the last evening of the conference, the Dalit (low-caste) poet Devanur Mahadeva got up to speak. He read out a short poem in Kannada, written not by him but by a Dalit woman of his acquaintance. The poem spoke reverentially of the great Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar (1889-1956), and, especially, of the dark blue suit that Ambedkar invariably wore in the last three decades of his life. Why did the Dalit lady focus on Ambedkar's suit, asked Mahadeva? Why, indeed, did the countless statues of Ambedkar put up in Dalit hamlets always have him clad in suit-and-tie, he asked? His answer was deceptively and eloquently simple. Now if Gandhi wears a loin-cloth, said Mahadeva, we all marvel at his tyaga, his sacrifice. The scantiness of dress is, in this case, a marker of what the man has given up. A high-caste, well-born, English educated lawyer had voluntarily chosen to give up power and position and live the life of an Indian peasant. That is why we memorialize that loincloth.

However, if Ambedkar had worn a loin cloth that would not occasion either wonder or surprise. He is an Untouchable, we would say—what else should he wear? Millions of his caste fellows wear nothing else. It is the fact that he has escaped this fate, the fact that his extraordinary personal achievements—a law degree from Lincoln's Inn, a Ph D from Columbia University, the drafting of the Constitution of India—allowed him to escape the fate that society and history allotted to him, that is so effectively symbolized in that blue suit. Modernity, not tradition, development, not stagnation, is responsible for this inversion, for this successful yet all-too-infrequent storming of the upper caste citadel.

Finally, it should be said that the aspirations for a better, or at least different, life, among the disprivileged or disadvantaged are not restricted to economic elements alone. The journalist who visited Douglas Tompkins's Chilean estate found that the folk musicians employed to preserve their music listened, on the sly, to American rap.

## VII

Let me now attempt to represent the story of Ambedkar's suit in more material terms. Consider these simple hierarchies of fuel, housing and transportation:

Table II

### Hierachies of Resource Consumption

Fuel Used Mode of Housing Mode of Transport

Grass Cave Feet

Wood, Dung Thatched hut Bullock cart

Coal, Kerosene Wooden house Bicycle

Gas Stone House Motor scooter Electricity Cement House Car

To go down any of these lists is to move towards a more reliable, more efficient, and generally safer mode of consumption. Why then would one abjure cheap and safe cooking fuel, for example, or quick and reliable transport, or stable houses that can outlive one monsoon? To prefer gas to dung for your stove, a car to a bullock-cart for your mobility, a wood home to a straw hut for your family, is to move towards more comfort, more well-being and more freedom. These are choices that, despite specious talk of cultural difference, must be made available to all humans.

At the same time, to move down these lists is to move towards a more intensive and possibly unsustainable use of resources. Unsustainable at the global level, that is, for while a car expands freedom, there is no possibility whatsoever of every human on earth being able to possess a car. As things stand, some people consume too much, while other people consume far too little. There is an intimate, though not often enough noticed overlap, between ecological entitlements and economic status. For not only do the rich and powerful consume more than their 'fair share' of the world's resources, they are also usually better protected from the consequences of environmental degradation. It is these asymmetries that a responsible politics would seek to address. Restricting ourselves to India, for instance, one would work towards enhancing the social power of ecological refugees and ecosystem people, their ability to govern their lives and to gain from the transformation of nature into artefact. This policy would simultaneously force omnivores to internalize the costs of their profligate behavior. A new, 'green' development strategy would have six central elements:



1. A move towards a genuinely participatory democracy, with a strengthening of the institutions of local governance (at village, town or district levels) mandated by the Constitution of India but aborted by successive Central Governments in New Delhi. The experience of the odd states, such as West Bengal and Karnataka, which have experimented seriously with the panchayat or self-government system suggests that local control is more conducive to the successful management of forests, water, and other natural resources.
2. Creation of a process of natural resource use which is open, accessible and accountable. This would centre around a properly implemented Freedom of Information Act, so that citizens are fully informed about the designs of the state, and better able to challenge or welcome them, thus making public officials more responsive to their public.
3. The use of decentralization to stop the widespread undervaluing of natural resources. The removing of subsidies and the putting of a proper price tag will make resource use more efficient and less destructive of the environment.
4. The encouragement of a shift to private enterprise for producing goods and services, while making sure that there are no hidden subsidies, and that firms properly internalize externalities. There is at present an unfortunate distaste for the market among Indian radicals, whether Gandhian or Marxist. But one cannot turn one's back on the market; the task rather is to tame it. The people and environment of India have already paid an enormous price for allowing state monopolies in sectors such as steel, energy, transport, and communications.
5. The outline of sustainable policies for specific resource sectors. Chapters IV and V outline ways in which the management of the forest and the wild can be made consistent with the twin, if sometimes competing, claims of ecological integrity and social equity. Likewise, scientists and social scientists with the relevant expertise need to design policies for sustainable policies for transport, energy, housing, health, and water management. These policies must take account of what is not merely desirable, but also what is feasible.
6. This kind of development can, however, only succeed if India is a far more equitable society than is the case at present. Three key ways in enhancing the social power of ecological refugees and ecosystem people (in all of which the Indian state has largely failed) are land reform, literacy—especially female literacy—and proper health care. These measures would also help bring population growth under control. In the provision of health and education the state might be aided by the voluntary sector, paid for by communities out of public funds.

The charter of sustainable development outlined here applies, of course, only to one country, albeit a large and probably fairly representative one. Its *raison d'être* is the persistent and grave inequalities of consumption within the nation. What then of inequalities of consumption within nations? This question has been authoritatively addressed in a study of the prospects for a 'Sustainable Germany' sponsored by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate and Ecology. Its

fundamental premise is that the North lays excessive claim to the 'environmental space' of the South. For the way the global economy is currently structured,

The North gains cheap access to cheap raw materials and hinders access to markets for processed products from those countries; it imposes a system (World Trade Organization) that favours the strong; it makes use of large areas of land in the South, tolerating soil degradation, damage to regional eco-systems, and disruption of local self-reliance; it exports toxic waste; it claims patent rights to utilization of biodiversity in tropical regions, etc.

Seen 'against the backdrop of a divided world', says the report, 'the excessive use of nature and its resources in the North is a principal block to greater justice in the world... A retreat of the rich from overconsumption is thus a necessary first step towards allowing space for improvement of the lives of an increasing number of people'. The problem thus identified, the report goes on to itemize, in meticulous detail, how Germany can take the lead in reorienting its economy and society towards a more sustainable path. It begins with an extended treatment of overconsumption, of the excessive use of the global commons by the West over the past two hundred years, of the terrestrial consequences of profligate lifestyles—soil erosion, forest depletion, biodiversity loss, air and water pollution. It then outlines a long range plan for reducing the 'throughput' of nature in the economy and cutting down on emissions.

Table III summarizes the targets set by the Wuppertal Institute. The report also outlines the policy and technical changes required to achieve them. These include the elimination of subsidies to chemical farming, the levying of ecological taxes (on gasoline, for example), and the move towards slower and fuel-efficient cars while shifting the movement of goods from road to rail. Some concrete examples of resource-conservation in practice are identified—such as the replacement of concrete girders by those made with steel, innovative examples of water-conservation and recycling within the city, and a novel contract between the Munich municipal authorities and organic farmers in the countryside. Building on examples such as these, Germany could transform itself from a nature-abusing society to a nature-saving one.

The Wuppertal Institute study is notable for its mix of moral ends with material means, as well as its judicious blending of economic and technical options. More striking still has been its reception. The original German book sold 40, 000 copies, with an additional 100, 000 copies of an abbreviated version. It was made into an award-winning television film, and discussed by trade unions, political parties, consumer groups, scholars, church congregations and countless lay citizens. In several German towns and regions the attempts have begun to put some of these proposals in practice.

Admittedly, to reduce consumption even in a green-conscious rich society like Germany will take great skill and dexterity. On the one hand, as the Wuppertal Institute has demonstrated, the affluent economies of the West might easily limit material consumption without a diminution in individual or social welfare. On the other hand, if the economy does not 'grow' at, say 3% to 4%

an annum, this will lead to unemployment. Which is precisely what happened during the SPD-Green coalition of 1998-2005, leading to their removal from office in the German elections of 2005. Of course, one might still aim for a 'steady-state economy' and address the problem of unemployment by following policies of internal redistribution, but this could put place great strains on the welfare state.

#### Table III

##### Some Environmental Objectives for a Sustainable Germany

##### Environmental Indicator Target set for the year 2010

##### Energy

Energy consumption (overall) at least –30%

Fossil fuels – 25%

Nuclear power – 100%

Renewables + 3 to 5% per year

Energy efficiency + 3 to 5% per year

##### Materials

Non-renewable raw materials –25%

Material productivity + 4 to 6% per year

##### Substance release

Carbon Dioxide – 35%

Sulphur Dioxide – 80 to 90%

Nitrogen oxides – 80% by 2005

Ammonia – 80 to 90%

Volatile organic compounds – 80% by 2005

Synthetic nitrogen fertilizers – 100%

Agricultural biocides – 100%

Soil erosion – 80 to 90%

##### Land Use

Agriculture Extensive conversion to organic farming methods

Forestry extensive conversion to ecologically adapted silviculture

Source: Wolfgang Sachs, Reinhard Loske and Manfred Linz et al, *Greening the North: A Post-Industrial Blueprint for Ecology and Equity* (London: Zed Books, 1998)

That governments are compelled to pursue policies which are popular enough to win or retain office—, thus further complicates what is already a deeply complicated relationship. The social needs and demands of the economy have to be made consistent with the natural constraints of ecology; and both have to be harmonized with the political imperatives of democracy.

To effectively and sustainably resolve these conflicts requires us to truly think through the environment: think through it morally and politically, historically and sociologically, and—not least—economically and technologically. The challenges that this poses are formidable indeed. Yet they have to be met. The inequalities of consumption must be addressed, and at both national and international levels. And the two are interconnected. The Spanish economist Juan Martinez-Alier provides one telling example. In the poorer countries of Asia and Africa, firewood and animal dung are often the only source of cooking fuel. These are inefficient and polluting, and their collection involves much drudgery. The provision of oil or LPG for the cooking stoves of the Nigerian or Nepali peasant woman would greatly improve the quality of their lives. This could be done, says Martinez-Alier, very easily if one very moderately taxed the rich. He calculates that to replace the fuel used by the 3000 million poor people in the world, we require about 200 millions of oil a year. Now this is less than a quarter of the United States' annual consumption. But the bitter irony is that 'oil at \$15 [or even \$ 50] a barrel is so cheap that it can be wasted by rich countries, but too expensive to be used as domestic fuel by the poor'. The solution is simple—namely, that oil consumption in the rich countries should be taxed, while the use of LPG or kerosene for fuel in the poor countries should be subsidized. Thus, to allow the poor to ascend but one step up the hierarchies of resource consumption requires a very moderate sacrifice by the rich. In the present climate, however, any proposal with even the slightest hint of redistribution would be shot down as smacking of 'socialism'. But this might change, as (and when) conflicts over consumption begin to sharpen, as they assuredly shall. Within countries, access to water, land, forest and mineral resources will be fiercely fought over between contending groups. Between countries, there will be bitter arguments about the 'environmental space' occupied by the richer nations. As these divisions become more manifest, the global replicability of North Atlantic styles of living shall be more directly and persistently challenged. Sometime in the middle decades of the 21st century, John Kenneth Galbraith's great unasked question 'How Much Should a Country Consume?'—with its Gandhian corollary, 'How Much Should a Person Consume?'—will come, finally, to dominate the intellectual and political debates of the time.

HOW MUCH SHOULD A PERSON CONSUME?

(published as Chapter IX of Ramachandra Guha, *How Much Should a Person Consume?*  
University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006)

## **THE ONES WHO STAYED BEHIND**

### **Economic and Political Weekly**

This essay is inspired, or more accurately perhaps provoked, by an invitation to participate in a cross-cultural symposium on ‘New Trends in South Asian Studies’. The symposium’s organizers suggested that while ‘Europe has long developed research traditions and produced much scholarly work on Asia’, it was ‘only in the last two decades that an increased production of knowledge has emerged from studies conducted by Asian scholars “at home”, to the extent that these have come to challenge past research trends and contributed to a renewed vision of these societies and cultures.’ Here, social science research of quality is believed to be of recent provenance in South Asia. It is further claimed that South Asian scholarship has come of age only through the migration of talented individuals to the intellectual centres of the West. Thus ‘Asian scholars are increasingly holding academic positions in the most prestigious institutions in the West, focusing on new questions, new objects, new approaches which—it might be argued—have contributed to defining new paradigms for research and to reconsidering the links between disciplines (i.e. anthropology and history)’.

Certainly, at the time the British left the sub-continent in 1947, there was not, in the strict sense, an established social science tradition in the region. The universities were few and far between. Research was not their aim; rather, they were supposed only to turn out lawyers and clerks and irrigation engineers. There were no serious scholarly journals either. Nonetheless, there were some individuals who defied the inhospitable climate of colonial rule to produce work of high quality. In Bombay, G. S. Ghurye was encouraging his students to conduct rigorous field-work while himself working on an enviable range of subjects: race, Indology, the comparison of civilizations. In Lucknow, Radhakamal Mukerjee was pioneering the discipline of social ecology. In Puné, Irawati Karve was beginning the studies of caste and kinship organization with which she was to make her name. Across the country, in Calcutta, Nirmal Bose was developing his idea of the ‘Hindu model of tribal absorption’.

Research in the social sciences and humanities got a ferocious filip with Independence. There were now new universities with new departments. New professional associations and journals were born. By the standards of a poor country, the state was generous with its funding. The quantity and, in time, the quality of research markedly increased. Institutions such as the Delhi School of Economics set standards of research and teaching to match those elsewhere in the

world. Scholars were encouraged and inspired by the commitment of their political leaders to the spirit of democracy. Unlike in other ex-colonies, there were no curbs on the freedom of expression and movement. Researchers could go where they wished, study what they wanted to, and say what they thought.

Fortunately for the new generation of South Asian scholars, there were now three acknowledged journals of merit: *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, edited by Dharma Kumar from the Delhi School of Economics; *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, edited by T. N. Madan at the Institute of Economic Growth, and the *Economic Weekly* (later the *Economic and Political Weekly*), edited, successively, by Sachin Chaudhuri and Krishna Raj from Bombay. These outstanding editors published essays on all kinds of themes: economic planning, agrarian structure, foreign trade; caste, kinship, social conflict; religion, party politics, electoral behavior; nationalism, environmentalism, feminism. They could call upon a bevy of first-rate Indian scholars who would write for them or solicit essays for them. Consider some of the people living and working in India in the nineteen sixties and seventies, the scholars whose names peeped in and out of the aforementioned journals. They included Romilla Thapar, Irfan Habib, and Ashin Dasgupta in history; S. C. Dube, André Béteille, and M. N. Srinivas in sociology; Amartya Sen, K. N. Raj, V. M. Dandekar and Krishna Bharadwaj in economics; and Rajni Kothari in political science.

The list, naturally, is illustrative, not exhaustive. Other names could (and must) be added. What they will illustrate is that, speaking of India, at any rate, one could say with confidence that by the late nineteen sixties there was in place a vigorous tradition of research and debate in the humanities and social sciences. It is quite mistaken to suggest that ‘it is only in the last two decades’ that work by Asian scholars at home and abroad has ‘come to challenge past research trends and contributed to a renewed vision of these societies and cultures.’

These words suggest an amnesia that, unfortunately, is quite widespread. The increasing visibility of South Asians in the international (especially American) academy has led to the mistaken and ahistorical claim that there was no tradition of serious research before the present crop of diasporic intellectuals made their leisurely way to the West. The work done by the Indian scholars of an earlier generation, it must be underlined, was theoretically subtle as well as empirically rich. André Béteille’s comparative studies of inequality elegantly matched social theory with field materials. M. N. Srinivas provided three concepts that greatly aided the understanding of modern India: Sanskritization, dominant caste, and vote bank. (The last of these concepts, indeed, can be used with profit to explore political processes almost anywhere in the modern world.) Radhakamal Mukerjee anticipated, by decades, the methodological alliance recently forged in American university departments between ecology and the social sciences. Years before any of us, these scholars were ‘focusing on new questions, new objects, new approaches which—it might be argued—have contributed to defining new paradigms for research and to reconsidering the links between disciplines.’

A direct acknowledgement of the robustness of Indian scholarship in the nineteen sixties and seventies is how highly this work was regarded in the metropolitan centres of intellectual power. In the early nineteen sixties, Romilla Thapar was invited to write the Penguin History of India. A decade later, Dharma Kumar was asked to edit the Cambridge Economic History of India. Two women scholars based in India were chosen over a host of likely foreign contenders by these generally conservative publishing houses. More noteworthy still were the invitations to Indian sociologists to undertake projects that were not about India at all. Thus M. N. Srinivas was invited to edit the posthumously collected papers of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and André Beteille was asked by Penguin to edit an authoritative cross-cultural collection on social inequality.

A second indicator of the 'state of the field' was that the best foreign scholars of South Asia wished to publish their best work in Indian journals. That was where the most vigorous and productive debates were. This is where you wished to be noticed if you lived in Paris or New York but worked on caste, or peasants, or de-industrialization, or religious violence.

Since the nineteen eighties, however, there has arisen a parallel discourse on South Asia. This is conducted in North American journals. The actors may be mostly of South Asian origin, and the subjects may nominally be South Asian. But the place of publication and, more importantly, the style of analysis and presentation are driven by the preoccupations of the American academy.

Thus, in 2003, one can speak meaningfully of two quite distinct discourses: one conducted within India, one conducted outside but apparently on India. These discourses have different inflections, different theoretical orientations, different purposes. Also, for the most part, different and largely overlapping casts of characters. Thus Indians living and working in India write primarily in Indian journals, while non-resident Indians and (increasingly) foreign scholars write primarily in journals published in North America.

The separation of the two discourses comes home most powerfully when one reads dissertations produced in America, which often tend to be ignorant of relevant Indian literature in the field, while quoting to excess works of social theory which seem to have little bearing on the dissertation's themes.

One more pointer to this separation: the journals a scholar might choose to publish his or her work in. I know from experience how hard it is to persuade a young scholar based in North America to publish in one of the quality Indian journals I have mentioned. Of ten individuals one asks, at best two or three might consider it, and then not for the 'meat' of their work, which is reserved for publication in American journals, but for its incidental by-products. One would think that for a diasporic scholar working on topics such as agriculture and pastoralism the Economic and Political Weekly is the logical place to publish, for the journal is read by thousands of scholars, social workers, activists, journalists and bureaucrats. To publish in its pages is to actively contribute to a rich and sophisticated public debate. When such a scholar chooses an

American journal in preference to the EPW, it is not difficult to conclude that for him (or her) 'India' is merely a resource on the road to scholarly advancement.

There is some traffic of ideas, but only a little. The Indian journals can be read by those in the West who are interested. However, the prohibitive cost of foreign journals means that, at least outside Delhi, no Indian student can get to read them. As for the aspiring scholar, he or she has to very quickly decide where his or her primary audience must lie. For the two discourses are driven by very different agendas. One is responding to the history and social debates of the sub-continent, the other to debates current in the American academy. The point will become clearer if one tries to compile an alphabetical lists of key words. The list, for the Indian case, might begin with 'Adivasi, backward caste, communalism, decentralization...'. The list, for the North American or diasporic scenario, might begin with 'aporia, bricolage, Cultural Studies, deconstruction...'. Likewise, a list of key texts and authors in India might begin with 'Ambedkar, Bêteille, (the) Constitution, Dharampal...', whereas the diasporic list might begin with 'Althusser, Bourdieu, Certeau, Derrida...'. The point cannot be over-stressed: that one discourse is located firmly in the cultural and political milieu of the sub-continent, whereas the other discourse is deliberately distancing itself from that milieu.

## II

As I see it, scholarly work in the humanities and social sciences basically has three kinds of motivations. One might be driven by the criteria of 'relevance', by the desire to influence policy by one's work or at least correct the injustices of history by one's writing. One might be excited by an intellectual puzzle, seeking through research and analysis to explain a complicated social process. Or one might merely be following an intellectual fashion.

The first two agendas take their cues from the wider world. They are both productive of serious and rigorous empirical research. The last trend is a response to the printed word. It is dictated by the journals or thinkers that are currently influential. Here, research takes second place to what passes for 'theory'.

None of these agendas are the privilege of any particular geographical location. Specific research projects may partake of more than one agenda. Over the course of their careers individuals may shift from one style of research to another. Yet I would suggest that there are discernible orientations, clear choices made by scholars and, in the aggregate, by communities. Indian scholars are more likely to be moved by 'social relevance' in choosing their topic of study and strategies of research. European scholars are by temperament and training more inclined to seek out, and answer, an intellectual puzzle. And scholars based in America are just a little more likely to be driven by fashion.

I have myself been lucky to have known two scholars who have devoted more than a decade of their lives to a single project. Nicholas Boyle, of Cambridge, had, as a very young man, planned a definitive life of Goethe; Hans Medick, of Gottingen, had, in middle-age—when other



historians consider writing a 'soft' volume on historiography—begun a long-range study of a single Swabian village. The two volumes Boyle has now published have assured his work the status of a great modern biography. Medick's study of Laichingen, when published, was immediately acclaimed as a classic work of social history. The years of toil and struggle paid off: yet can one easily imagine their undertaking the task had they been located in an American academy? Would not considerations of tenure, citation indices, student assessments and the like have put paid to any such ambitions?

As it happens, there are a few American scholars who have bucked the trend. One such is Robert P. Goldman of the University of California at Berkeley. He has made it his life's work to study and translate the Ramayana. He is a scholar of depth and subtlety who is truly in command of his subject. But the subject, alas, is not currently fashionable. Indeed, it can too easily be cast as an 'Orientalist' project, an unpolitical and hence anti-political work of the kind white males tend to take up.

Another American scholar I greatly admire is Richard Eaton. His book *The Rise of Islam on the Bengal Frontier* is a classic. It starts with a puzzle: how did Islam most flourish in a part of the sub-continent distant from the centres of Muslim rule? Why did Bengalis convert en masse when the Rajputs and Jats, so close to Delhi, did not? Eaton learnt some new languages to find out. Still, the answer required him to detour into geography, agriculture, anthropology, religious history, and architecture. His book thus became a 'total' history. Yet it is presented in prose so transparent that it effectively masks the years of dogged and difficult research which lie beneath it. The illustrations, gathered from the author's fieldwork, are an added treat.

A third American scholar I might mention here is Thomas Trautmann. He is a superb intellectual craftsman whose chosen field is the history of ideas. I have read with delight Trautmann's extraordinary 'biography of a book', on the making of Lewis Henry Morgan's book on kinship. I have been educated and entertained by his recent essays on the idea of race and the study of Indian languages. His little essay 'Elephants and the Mauryas' is one of my all-time favourite pieces of historical reconstruction.

I have singled out a series of white men, so let me complicate the picture by introducing a little diversity. A fourth American whose work has both captivated and influenced me is Eleanor Zelliot, the doyenne of historians of untouchability, that sensitive student of contemporary Maharashtra who is widely admired by the scholars and activists of Maharashtra. The last name on this necessarily abbreviated list is that of Ann Grodzins Gold. Gold is the author of an acclaimed study of Rajasthani pilgrims. I have just read her most recent book, which is an ethno-history of the changing physical and moral ecology of Rajasthan. This is a model of empathetic and in-depth ethnography, its results communicated with an uncommon grace.

Where do Goldman and Eaton and Trautmann and Zelliot and Gold figure in the canon of South Asian Studies? Judging from the country where they work in, the United States of America, not

very high. Were they to enter a seminar room at the Association of Asian Studies meetings there would not be the buzz that would certainly accompany the entrance of diasporic scholars ten times as glamorous but not half as accomplished. I venture to suggest that there are two reasons for this state of affairs: the style of their research, which is classical rather than contemporary, and the colour of their skin. For the demographic changes in the American academy and the rise of 'identity politics' have successfully marginalized the white scholar of South Asia. The careful empirical work and command of languages that was their hallmark now tends to be dismissed as 'irrelevant' (or worse). The need to appear politically correct or to be in with the latest trends becomes paramount. These trends can have a painful effect on emigré scholars too. At least two Indian historians of my acquaintance have abandoned empirical research after moving to permanent jobs in U. S. universities. They each wrote a fine work of social history, based on research in a dozen different archives. They have now taken to writing essays based on books ordered from the library. These essays are supposed to be exercises in 'theory'. For the most part, however, they are merely extended literature reviews, parasitic assessments of other people's works according to the winds of theoretical fashion and the canons of political correctness.

Some American scholars do have reservations about the trends I have here identified, but are reluctant to express them even in private, let alone in public. This is in part due to the contagion known as 'white liberal guilt'. These scholars know that any criticism of the styles of scholarship that run under the rubrics of 'post-structuralism' and 'Cultural Studies' would expose them to accusations of being 'racist' or 'ethnocentric'. However poorly founded, these accusations, once made, would be deadly in personal as well as political terms.

This is doubly unfortunate, because post-structuralism and Cultural Studies are trends of dubious intellectual worth, and because its South Asian proponents belong overwhelmingly to the upper class. In the American academy they might strategically ally with the African-Americans. But they are far from being victims of racial oppression; nor—unlike the East European Jews or the Irish or the Vietnamese boat people, did they come to North America fleeing poverty or persecution. One might even say that, after the men who travelled to America on the Mayflower, the South Asian professionals are the first immigrants who come from a privileged background. They have gone from being élites in their own society to being élites in North America. Why feel intimidated by them?

In the eyes of their American colleagues, the diasporic scholar has come to 'represent' India much as the Vietnamese or Ukranian emigré represents Vietnam or the Ukraine. Some crucial distinctions are thereby overlooked: namely, that unlike Vietnam and Ukraine and many other countries whose former nationals now work in the American academy, India is (for the most part) an open society with a functioning democracy, and that unlike those other countries India has an old and still active tradition of intellectual enquiry.

This said, one must admit that the picture is not, of course, completely black and white. There are American scholars of WASP extraction who have likewise reduced history to the scrutiny of easily accessible printed texts. And there are Indian scholars based in North America who continue to do serious and subtle research on anthropological and historical subjects. To pick names, again for illustrative purposes only, I might mention Kirin Narayan's studies of folklore and Vijay Prashad's work on untouchables, both of which have genuinely illuminated for me the India that I live in. Then there is K. Sivaramakrishnan, whose anthropological history of Bengal forestry breaks new ground in inter-disciplinary research. One must hope that scholars such as these set the trend for the younger generation, rather than the diasporic South Asians who currently hold sway, whose penchant for posturing and jargon-mongering greatly exceeds their capacity for independent and original research.

These scholars speak grandly of 'provincializing Europe', but refuse to learn the necessary languages to do the job themselves. Consider, by way of contrast, the biography of Vasco Da Gama written by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, a work of impeccable scholarship that does not choose to present itself as a 'reversing of the gaze' or 'the provincializing of Europe'. My own hope is that in time the diaspora shall turn from its current absorption with the self towards the serious study of the history and politics of the West. Or of other countries around the world. Exemplary here has been the work on the Chinese peasantry of Kamal Sheel and Prasenjit Duara, of Sunil Khilnani on French intellectual history, and (as already mentioned) of Subrahmanyam on European expansion.

The founding fathers and mothers of Indian scholarship were always open to ideas and individuals from the West. They travelled extensively outside India with an open mind and an enquiring eye. For the most part, however, they lived and worked in India. They followed Tagore and Gandhi in believing that a commitment to one's culture was not necessarily incompatible with a creative and ongoing engagement with other cultures. Perhaps I should stop speaking in the past tense, for there are still many of these scholars at work in India, scholars old, middle-aged, and young. In Calcutta, individuals such as Rajat Ray and Sukanta Chaudhuri nobly carry on the great Bengali tradition of the teacher-scholar. Teachers at institutions such as the Delhi School of Economics and JNU's Centre for Historical Studies continue to inspire their students to produce high-quality dissertations.

Admittedly, these scholars face major obstacles: low salaries, shortages of research funds, lousy libraries, political interference, and so on. Largely for material reasons, young Indian academics now are increasingly attracted to jobs in the West (and particularly in the U. S. A.) Previously it was only the economists who migrated. Now the historians and anthropologists are joining them. A tradition of humanistic research in India that goes back almost a century is under threat. I must confess to a vested interest in its renewal. But there are solid intellectual reasons for us to wish that the tradition stays alive. Judging by what it has produced in the past, it is of rather more worth than the self-regarding productions advertised as the intellectual achievements of the South Asian diaspora.

The Telegraph, reviewing 'At Home in Diaspora', singles out my piece as 'interesting', but says 'most of the essays are marked by much narcissism and self-indulgence, which is surprising since most of the contributors are well into middle age'.

[actually, it is not surprising-- it in fact explains it].

Dear Ravi,

I just saw your piece in the Book Review. There you write: 'Just about all the European historians Guha mentions with approval also teach in the US'. For the record, these are the European scholars I mention in my piece:

Hans Medick, Nicholas Boyle, David Arnold, Jonathan Parry, David Hardiman, Juan Martinez Alier, Arne Kalland, Wolfgang Sachs. Of these none, I repeat none, teach in the U. S. All have full-time appointments in European institutions.

I do not want to read too much into your error. But it can only reinforce my 'anti theoretical voice'.

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## NOTES

A collection of papers on this theme, 'New Trends in South Asian Studies', edited by Veronique Benei and Jackie Assayag, is to be published by Permanent Black. A slightly different form of the present essay will also be published there.

The names singled out above are of individuals of character and achievement who also tended to be individualists. However, one must not forget to mention two of their contemporaries who were scholars as well as institution-builders: the economist and sociologist D. R. Gadgil, who founded the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, and the physicist P. C. Mahalanobis, who founded the Indian Statistical Institute in Calcutta, which despite its name and the formal training of its Director was from the beginning hospitable to inter-disciplinary research in the social sciences. On Gadgil and Mahalanobis, see also Ramachandra Guha, 'The Absent Liberal: An Essay on Politics and Intellectual Life', EPW, 15 December 2001.

This is perhaps the place to inject a further word or two in praise of M. N. Srinivas. No scholar, in my view, has contributed more creatively or substantively to the understanding of modern India, both through his own scholarly work, and through his training of an outstanding set of sociologists and anthropologists in Baroda and Delhi (André Bételle, Veena Das, E. A. Ramaswamy, A. M. Shah, and N. R. Sheth were among his doctoral students). I personally regard him as the first world-class social scientist or historian produced by India. That my opinion is not more widely shared is probably because Srinivas was a scholar qua scholar, who did not place himself at the head of a political or ideological school. Relevant in this connection

is a remark I once heard made Srinivas make in the privacy of his own drawing-room: ‘Media attention is the enemy of scholarship’.

Having said this, there are indeed some scholars, not usually Indian, who have adequately recognized Srinivas’s precosity and distinction. He was greatly admired by generations of British social anthropologists (among these, many who did not work on India). And I remember reading a book published c. 1990 by an American Marxist anthropologist who worked on Africa. This book’s preface started with a slice of autobiography, where the author (David Donham) spoke of how he came to the study of anthropology. The first sentences went something like this: ‘It was 1970. The war had begun to intensify in Vietnam. After the unnatural deaths of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, the civil rights movement had gone into decline. Richard Nixon was contemplating the set of illegal actions that were to be collapsed under the rubric, “Watergate”. And M. N. Srinivas’s field notes had just been burnt by an arsonist in Stanford’.

The invocation was evocative and wholly apposite. I have quoted the lines from memory—Donham’s book is not available in any library in the town in which I live—and have possibly embellished a bit. But not by very much. The point is this—the juxtaposition of the making of The Remembered Village with political events of large import shows how much Srinivas’s work meant to the intellectual biography of an American anthropologist of Africa, and, beyond this, to the larger history of the discipline as well.

The names singled out in the preceding paragraphs stem exclusively from one person’s experience. These are the scholars with whom I have come in contact through circumstance and common interests. One could easily multiply this list ten fold, thus to more effectively make the point that there is an impressive depth and versatility to white American scholarship on South Asia.

An earlier version of this essay was read and commented upon by Rukun Advani, André Béteille, and Nandini Sundar. The usual disclaimer applies with more-than-usual force: I am solely responsible for the views expressed here.

## THE ONES WHO STAYED BEHIND

by Ramachandra Guha

(published in the Economic and Political Weekly, 22nd March 2003)

## **THE ENVIRONMENTALIST OF THE POOR: ANIL AGARWAL**

### **Economic and Political Weekly**

The Berkeley Nobel Laureate George Akerlof once remarked of his fellow economists that if you showed them something that worked in practice, they would not be satisfied unless it was also seen to work in theory. This insight explains much about the dismal science, including why, as late as 1980, the M. I. T. economist Lester Thurow could so magisterially write: 'If you look at the countries that are interested in environmentalism, or at the individuals who support environmentalism within each country, one is struck by the extent to which environmentalism is an interest of the upper middle class. Poor countries and poor individuals simply aren't interested.'

It does not appear that Thurow looked very closely around the globe. For, seven years before he wrote his lines, the Chipko Andolan had decisively announced the poor's entry into the domain of environmentalism. Nor was Chipko unique: the decade of the seventies saw a whole slew of popular movements in defense of local rights to forest, fish and water resources, as well as protests against large dams. These movements took place in India, Brazil, Malaysia, Ecuador and Kenya, and among peasants, pastoralists, and fisherfolk: that is, among communities even economists could identify as being poor.

Lester Thurow could write as he did because of the theory that environmentalism was a full stomach phenomenon. In the West, the rise of the green movement in the nineteen sixties was widely interpreted as a manifestation of what was called 'post-materialism'. The consumer societies of the North Atlantic world, wrote the political scientist Ronald Inglehart, had collectively shifted 'from giving top priority to physical sustenance and safety toward heavier emphasis on belonging, self-expression, and the quality of life'. It was thought that a cultivated interest in the protection of nature was possible only when the necessities of life could be taken for granted. As for the poor, their waking hours were spent foraging for food, water, housing, energy: how could they be concerned with something as elevated as the environment?

Movements such as Chipko challenged the post-materialist hypothesis, in practice. But its decisive theoretical refutation was the work of the campaigning journalist Anil Agarwal, who died in Dehradun on the 2nd of January 2002, aged fifty-four. Agarwal was a man of ferocious intelligence and commitment, these traits displayed early. At the Indian Institute of Technology,

Kanpur, where he studied Mechanical Engineering, he was elected President of the Students' Gymkhana. After he graduated, he travelled in Europe but came back to join the Hindustan Times as a science reporter, this when his classmates were taking the already well trodden route to the United States. His flair for communicating complex ideas in clear language was recognized by the New Scientist, for whom he also began to write.

The story that changed Agarwal's life originated in a visit to the Alakananda Valley sometime in early 1975. The Chipko Andolan was then less than two years old. But Agarwal was impressed by what it had already done, and more impressed still by its leader, Chandi Prasad Bhatt. Agarwal returned from Garhwal with an essay that, with a key word misspelt, was printed in the New Scientist under the title 'Ghandi's Ghost Protects the Himalayan Trees'. It might have been the first account of the Chipko movement in the international press. It was certainly a definitive moment in the career of its author. It was through Chipko that he came to understand that the poor had, if anything, a greater stake in the responsible management of the environment. That insight became the driving force of his work over the next twenty-five years.

In the mid seventies Agarwal moved to London to join the International Institute for Environment and Development. There he came under the caring tutelage of Barbara Ward, the author with René Dubos of *Only One Earth*, the 'official' text of the first United Nations Symposium on the Environment. Then, encouraged by that remarkable civil servant Lovraj Kumar, he decided to return to India, to found the Centre for Science and Environment in New Delhi.

Not long after founding CSE, Agarwal went for a meeting in Malaysia, a trip that was as definitive as his earlier trek to Garhwal. For his hosts in Penang had just published a report on the 'State of Malaysia's Environment'. It was a slim document, but suggestive. No sooner had he read it did Agarwal start planning a more ambitious Indian version. The material was at hand, if one cared to look for it. For the natural resource conflicts of the seventies had been attentively and sympathetically documented by our journalists, writing in English as well as in the Indian languages. The academic community was by and large blind to the degradation of the environment, but here too there were exceptions, most notably the partnership of the ecologist Madhav Gadgil and the anthropologist Kailash Malhotra. These two had just completed an extended study on behalf of the newly instituted Department of Environment, which documented the shrinking access to nature in the villages and hamlets of India. And there was also the work on fisheries by John Kurien and on common property by N. S. Jodha: two economists with a most atypical orientation towards fieldwork.

Drawing on these scattered studies, and aided by his colleagues Ravi Chopra and Kalpana Sharma, Agarwal and the CSE published *The State of India's Environment 1982: A Citizens' Report*. This was a landmark in an intellectual sense, as the first serious overview of the use and abuse of nature in India. But its merits were as much about form as about content. The report was attractively produced and imaginatively laid out: plenty of pictures interwoven with the text,

boxes artfully designed to highlight salutary or egregious examples, numbers and tables sparingly but effectively used.

The First Citizens' Report was, in a word, a triumph. Two years later the CSE put out a Second Citizens' Report, edited by Agarwal and Sunita Narain, an effervescent young activist who had come to environmentalism through the Delhi-based students' group, Kalpavriksh. This report was presented as elegantly as its predecessor, but it was more thorough, and enriched also by two essays on the politics of the environment written by Agarwal and by Dunu Roy.

The Citizens' Reports were a simultaneous wake-up call to an insular academy, a half-blind state, and a somnolent public. They were read, discussed, and acted upon, and came to enjoy a influence far in excess of what its editors anticipated: an influence, however, that was not out of proportion to their intrinsic value. Among the signs of how good the reports were was who chose to translate them. These included the great Kannada novelist and polymath Shivram Karanth, as well as the respected environmentalist and Chipko historian Anupam Mishra, who rendered the reports into Hindi.

In between the publication of the two Citizens' Reports Anil Agarwal came to give a talk in Calcutta. I lived then in that city, while in the last throes of a dissertation on forests and social protest in the Himalaya. During the course of my research I had met Agarwal, interviewed him on his encounters with Chipko, and raided the files on the movement that he generously placed at my disposal. Like him, I had met and been captivated by Chandi Prasad Bhatt. My conversion to their brand of environmentalism, however, was interrupted at every stage by my milieu, by the dominance in Calcutta of a worldview that regarded ecology as a bourgeois deviation from the class struggle.

It was to such a skeptical audience that Anil Agarwal was asked to speak. The talk was held in the Mahabodhi Society, in a long low hall which, like all such places in Calcutta, had a marked scarcity of light. But this dark room was gloriously illuminated by the lecturer. Agarwal was a little man, five feet four inches at most, his figure made less prepossessing by a heavily banded pair of spectacles. Yet the glasses could not hide the sparkle, the slightness of his figure not overshadow the manifest energy and enthusiasm. Bobbing up and down the podium, he delivered a missionary sermon to a bunch of pagans, piling up example upon example of the destruction of nature and its impacts on the poor. The crowd, at first unbelieving, slowly came round, persuaded by the integrity of the man as much by the solid core of his message.

Agarwal was that rare bird, a superb public speaker who was also a skilled writer. (Indians who are good at the one form of communication are generally hopeless at the other.) He had a way of immediately attracting the reader's attention, most often through clever juxtaposition. Thus his flamboyant but also deeply insightful remark of how natural resources management in India was a case of 'nineteenth century laws for twenty-first century realities.' Thus also his mischievous yet not entirely facetious desire to define GNP afresh as 'Gross Nature Product'. I recall, too, a



piece on how the Maharashtra government had been forbidden by the Forest Conservation Act to construct water taps for pilgrims en route to the shrine of Bhimashankar. Agarwal suggested that they would get their way, and the pilgrims allowed to slake their thirst, were the application to the Centre reworded to claim that the taps were intended for migrating elephants. (The recommendation was acutely topical, for the Environment Minister at the time was the animal fundamentalist Maneka Gandhi )

Under Agarwal's leadership CSE played a critical role in at least four environmental campaigns. To begin with, the Chipko experience informed his participation in the countrywide struggle for a democratic forest management. This struggle won a partial success when, in 1988, the Indian Parliament accepted that ecological stability and people's needs, rather than commercial exploitation, were to be the cornerstones of the new, 'official', forest policy. Inspired by the same ideals of local participation and control were the CSE's seminars and reports on traditional water harvesting. These, emphasizing the creative partnership between indigenous knowledge and collective action, were compiled in a valuable volume with the characteristically catchy title, *Dying Wisdom*.

Admiration for the work of Anil Agarwal and the CSE had never been confined to India. Nonetheless, their presence on the global stage was enhanced by the publication, in 1989, of *Global Warming in an Unequal World*, a pamphlet co-authored by Agarwal and Sunita Narain. This made a distinction between the 'survival emissions' of the poor, as for instance the methane released by paddy cultivation, and the 'luxury emissions' of the rich, such as the gases released into the atmosphere by the automobile-industrial complex. The conventional wisdom out of Washington sought to suggest that the poor were as responsible for global warming: thus countries such as India and China needed to be as quick and ready in their remedial measures as, say, the United States and Germany. This wisdom had recently been restated in a report of the World Resources Institute, a report which Agarwal and Narain brutally took apart. They showed, first, that the WRI report erased the past, the historical responsibility for the build up of greenhouse gases by the industrialized countries, and second, that in its prescriptions for the future the WRI made the unfair and illogical assumption that the carbon 'sink' provided by the oceans and atmosphere should be divided in proportion to the magnitude of greenhouse gases currently emitted by each country. A more just and tenable assumption, argued the Indians, would be to allocate each individual human being an equal share of the carbon sink.

The WRI report, in sum, sought to blame the victims and reward the polluters. This, said Agarwal and Narain, was an unhappy but by no means unique illustration of the 'environmental colonialism' that ruled international negotiations on climate change and the protection of biodiversity. As the CSE complained in a 'Statement on Global Democracy' issued specially for the Earth Summit of June 1992:

There is no effort to create new levels of power that would allow all citizens of the world to participate in global environmental management. Today, the reality is that Northern governments

and institutions can, using their economic and political power, intervene in, say, Bangladesh's development. But no Bangladeshi can intervene in the development processes of Northern economies even if global warming caused largely by Northern emissions may submerge half [their] country.

Even so, at least one Indian was able to positively intervene in global debates. Sometimes his influence passed unnoticed. Thus the Worldwatch Institute has reproduced, more-or-less wholesale, the framework of the CSE Citizens Reports in its own State of the World Reports, issued annually since 1987. These follow the Indian example in dividing the report into thematic sections, in using boxes as a key illustrative device, and in seeking to address multiple audiences, policy as well as popular. The imitation is so obvious that one wonders whether Agarwal ever sought to seek payment for his hard-won intellectual property.

Anil Agarwal was a little man possessed of an almost heroic determination. He conducted a long battle against chronic asthma, and then, in 1994, was diagnosed as suffering from a very rare form of cancer, which affected the eyes and the brain. From his sick-bed and while in remission he planned and carried out his last campaign. This related to the shamefully high levels of air pollution in India's capital city, Delhi. The CSE report on the problem was called, with an evocative economy so typical of the man, *Slow Murder*. This report almost singlehandedly forced the government to introduce remedial measures, these aimed both at vehicles and at factories. Agarwal's own insistence on Compressed Natural Gas as the sole alternative to existing fuels became somewhat controversial. The jury is still out on whether CNG or low-sulphur diesel is the more suitable choice, yet there is no gainsaying the fact that without Agarwal and the CSE, the citizens of Delhi might still be subject to the ancien regime of pollution unchecked and undiagnosed.

For more than twenty years Anil Agarwal was India's most articulate and influential writer on the environment. Viewing his career in the round, one is struck by several features. First, the ability to synthesize the results of specialized scientific studies. Second, the knack of communicating this synthesis in accessible prose. Third, the insistence that it was not enough for the environmentalist to hector and chastise: solutions had to be offered, even if the state was as yet unwilling to act upon them.

One is impressed, too, by the range of Agarwal's work. Forests, water, biodiversity, climate change at the global level, air pollution in a single city: he had studied and written about them all. What united these dispersed and prolific writings is that Agarwal sought always to approach environmental problems from the perspective of the poor. His oeuvre provided an intellectual and moral challenge to the belief that the poor were too poor to be green. He demonstrated that in the biomass economies of the rural Third World, the poor had a vital interest in the careful management of forests, soil, pasture, and water. (The rich could more easily shift to alternative fuels and building materials.) In his later work, he showed likewise that the more prosperous the

country or community, the more likely it was to insulate itself from the harmful effects of pollution, while passing on the burden to the disadvantaged.

If one were forced to recommend a single essay of Agarwal's, it must be his World Conservation Lecture of 1985, first published in *The Environmentalist*, 1986, and reprinted in an anthology edited by the present writer, (*Social Ecology*, OUP, 1994). This presents a detailed picture of environmental destruction in India, against the backdrop of the rather different Western experience. The examples are drawn from across the country, and deal with different natural resources. But the conclusions are crisply and unambiguously stated. The 'first lesson' is that 'the main source of environmental destruction in the world is the demand for natural resources generated by the consumption of the rich (whether they are rich nations or rich individuals and groups within nations)...' The 'second lesson' is that 'it is the poor who are affected the most by environmental destruction'; thus, 'eradication of poverty in a country like India is simply not possible without the rational management of our environment and that, conversely, environmental destruction will only intensify poverty'.

In this essay of 1986, Agarwal anticipates a theme later picked up by feminist writers. As he put it,

The destruction of the environment clearly poses the biggest threat to marginal cultures and occupations like that of tribals, nomads, fisherfolk and artisans, which have always been heavily dependent on their immediate environment for their survival. But the maximum impact of the destruction of biomass sources is on women. Women in all rural cultures are affected, especially women from poor landless, marginal and small farming families. Seen from the point of view of these women, it can be argued that all development is ignorant of women's needs, and often anti-women, literally designed to increase their work burden.

The process of resource degradation, wrote Agarwal, had made it more difficult and dangerous for women to go about the business of fuel, fodder and water collection. He made an inspired distinction between 'male' trees—species promoted by the forest departments that seek to increase cash income—and 'female' species, those species that lighten the woman's load yet tend not to be favoured by public agencies. On the whole, Agarwal's understanding of the gender dimensions of the environment debate was indubitably ahead of its time. It has always seemed to me that his precocity has not been adequately recognized, perhaps because in this regard he happened to belong to the wrong gender himself.

It was, I think, Voltaire who said that while one might seek to flatter the living, the dead deserve nothing less than the truth. No assessment of Anil Agarwal as writer and activist can overlook his flaws. These were personal and they were intellectual. Thus, while the first two, pioneering, Citizens' Reports were being produced, Agarwal and the CSE were catalysts to a genuinely collaborative exercise. Over the years, however, Agarwal came to distance himself from many other individuals and trends in the environmental community, who had once worked with him

and contributed to his reports. Perhaps this alienation was related to his creeping cancer. Still, one could not altogether overcome the suspicion that the CSE would participate in a campaign only if it could orchestrate and direct it. One example was the organization's withdrawal, over the past decade, from the continuing struggle for forest democracy. Again, it is something of a pity that the activities of the Narmada Bachao Andolan were never adequately covered in the pages of the CSE fortnightly, *Down to Earth*. Future historians of this most important social movement will find more meat in reports in daily newspapers than they would in a journal that specialized in the environment.

Agarwal had a deeply prejudiced attitude towards the bureaucracy, which he distrusted and seemed at times even to despise. This is a trait shared by some kinds of Gandhians and some kinds of Marxists, and indeed Agarwal was a sort of socialist Gandhian himself. What made his prejudice less palatable, however, is that he also had a curious fascination for ruling politicians. At various times he closely identified himself with Rajiv Gandhi, Kamal Nath, and Digvijay Singh, individuals with regard to whom he kept in abeyance his otherwise skeptical attitude towards power and authority.

In an interview to *Seminar*, Agarwal described the bureaucracy as 'pig-headed, obstinate and stupid'. 'I don't expect the bureaucracy to do it', he added, speaking of natural resource management, adding: 'The only way the bureaucracy will work together is if there is a drive from the top.' These strictures were excessive as well as false: forestry reform in West Bengal was initiated by capable and far-sighted officials without any kind of directive from the 'top'. There are good bureaucrats as well as as bad ones. Agarwal hoped to dispense with the class altogether, a wish that seems naive in light of the needs of a complex modern society. (Perhaps in a long distant past a benevolent raja could actually 'return the forests to the people'.) Our politicians needs to be sensitized and, in my view more crucially, our bureaucrats, humanized. This, of course, will take much persuasion and agitation. Still, a sustainable system of environmental management cannot come about by turning one's back on officials of the state, whether they be paid or elected.

There are environmental activists who were wounded by Agarwal's capricious behaviour, and there are environmental scholars who were obliged to state their disagreement with aspects of his work. Yet even when we stopped speaking with him we still read him. That is one measure of his importance, but I hope I have adequately stressed the other measures too. It was a privilege to have known him, and a honour to have been a fellow traveller on that rocky road, the Indian road to sustainability.

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